

青春ブタ野郎は

プチデビル後輩の
夢を見ない



鴨志田一

イラスト♥溝口ケージ

Seishun Buta Yarou Series

vol.2

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TVに目を向ける。
確かに知っている人物が映っていた。
スポーツドリンクのCM。
それも、今、咲太が手にしている
青いラベルのやつ。

さくらが
桜島麻衣
峰ヶ原高校3年生、3役時代から
活躍する超人気タレント。

あすき
梓川がえで
咲太の妹。過去のいじめが原因で
自宅から出られなくなった。

あすき
梓川咲太
峰ヶ原高校2年生、麻衣と
彼氏彼女になったはずが……？



こが ともえ
古賀朋絵

峰ヶ原高校1年生。ふとした瞬間から
味方と「嘘の恋人契約」を結ぶ。

「ま、かわいいと思っぞ」
「か、かわいいって言うな」
「じゃあ、なんて言うかは」
「……かわいいかな」



Prologue

That day, Azusagawa Sakuta woke up to yesterday's morning.

Chapter 1 — There's no Tomorrow for a Low-Life

1

“Well done, team Japan!” The inexhaustibly excited announcer began the morning news. “Good morning, today is Friday, June the twenty-seventh. I think we’ll start the day on football!”

The TV in the living room was showing the highlights of a world cup match that had taken place on the other side of the world. It was the second group league match, which had been played late at night for Japan itself. It was just before halftime, and the Japanese team were a single point behind. Number 10 had dribbled the ball all the way up the pitch but was taken down by an overzealous defence from the opponents. The whistle pierced the stadium and they were given a free kick from just behind the penalty area.

Number 4 placed the ball down and backed up step-by-step. You could feel the tension, even through the screen.

Sakuta watched the screen absently.

“I’ve... seen this.”

He wouldn’t have watched a late-night game live. Sakuta had watched these highlights *yesterday morning*. The ball would go past the keeper and find its home in the netting of the goal.

Holding his breath, Sakuta watched the highlight. The ball arced through the trajectory just as Sakuta had remembered it, flying into the goal.

They had drawn even and their opponents were chewing their lips in consternation. Number 4 gave a roar of triumph, echoed by the other players and their supporters.

With the momentum of that goal, the Japanese team had gained an additional point in the second half and maintained that lead to a glorious

victory.

The results played out just as he remembered them, so to reassure himself of his control over himself he stuck his head back in his room to check his alarm clock. It sat at the side of his bed, its digital display showing the date as well as the time.

June 27th.

The same as the announcer had just reported.

“What... on Earth...” From what Sakuta remembered, it should be the twenty-eight. And yet both the TV and the clock said it was the twenty-seventh. So today was yesterday, and yesterday was today. “...I see, a dream.”

Sakuta got back into bed, covered himself in the quilt again and went back to sleep.

If today was yesterday, he could sleep until tomorrow. Just as he had that thought and had closed his eyes, the door clicked open.

“Onii-chan, weren’t you just up?” He heard his sister’s voice. She approached with a quiet patter of footsteps. “You can’t go back to sleep, wake up.”

She shook him.

“I’m sleeping until tomorrow.”

“You’re alright with missing school?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’ll sleep with you,” she said, burrowing her way into the quilt as she did.

“I’ll get up then.”

He rose abruptly.

“Eh? So quickly!?”

He stood, almost like he was passing Kaede on her way into the bed wearing her panda pyjamas. He moderated his escapism and returned to the living room. The morning news was still talking about the football.

Kaede came pattering in just behind him.

“Hey, Kaede.”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to ask something kind of weird.”

“I-it’s not anything perverted, is it?”

“It’s not.”

“Y-you can’t do something like that, Onii-chan,” she said as she squirmed and covered her face, not listening to him.

“Did you see this report yesterday?”

“...The football report?” She asked, peeking through a gap in her fingers.

“Yes.”

“Umm, I didn’t?” Kaede almost asked, confused at what he was questioning and frowning slightly.

“I figured... that’s fine then.”

As he answered, Sakuta felt a sense of unease brewing in his stomach, like he was about to get involved in something bad.

Still feeling like he was in some kind of delusion, Sakuta ate breakfast with Kaede, and still not understanding, left for school.

Maybe it’d become clear if he went outside, he thought.

“See you later, Onii-chan.”

Kaede watched him leave with a smile. Unlike his usual habit, he headed towards the station while paying careful attention to his surroundings. He walked past the flats and detached houses that lined the streets, by the side of the park and crossed the bridge that came into sight onto the main street. As he approached the station itself, his sight was filled with business hotels and electronics wholesalers.

Throughout Sakuta’s journey, there was nothing that stuck out to him. There were other commuters heading to the same Station as him, housewives putting

out the rubbish and even the old man that ran the flower shop cleaning up around the store.

It had taken him around ten minutes to walk to Fujisawa Station, right in the middle of the city by the same name, in the Kanagawa Prefecture. There were crowds of commuting workers and students walking to and fro around the area. The workers were transferring to the Tokaido Line and the Students were streaming through the Odakyu ticket gate towards the Fujisawa Enoden station, the same as Sakuta would be. None of them seemed to falter in their walks, just briskly proceeding towards their destination. None of them even spared a sideways glance, Sakuta was the only one looking around restlessly, watching others' actions.

“Is it just me...?”

As he passed through the ticket gate, he could feel a sense of unease prickling under his skin that that was indeed the case.

He waited on the platform for two minutes before boarding the train as it arrived. It was old-fashioned, only four carriages long. The bell rang to warn of the doors closing and the train pulled away.

After being rocked by the train for about fifteen minutes, they had arrived at Shichirigahama Station on the coast, a few minutes walk from Minegahara High School, the school Sakuta attended. Other students in the same uniform milled out onto the platform. The scent of the salty sea breeze hit Sakuta as he stepped outside, a sign of the approaching summer. In another ten days, the beaches nearby would be opened and filled with people going to swim in the ocean.

When he looked towards the sea, he could see several sails of windsurfers that were making the most of the clear day within the rainy season. It was a familiar sight, with nothing particularly odd about it.

The short road to the school was the same as always, packed with Minegahara High School Students. There were first-year boys messing around with their classmates, third-year students with textbooks in hand, girls chattering about the karaoke night they'd had after school the night before...

Everywhere he looked, Sakuta could see nothing but the usual sights.

There wasn't a single conversation like:

"Hey, isn't this the second time today happened?"

"Right? Me too, me too!"

"It's seriously freaking me out."

It was only Sakuta that walked in a daze, confused at a second twenty-seventh of June.

"Sup, Sakuta. You've got bed-head again," one of his only two friends, Kunimi Yuuma, called out to him after he passed through the school gate and in to the school proper.

Yuuma had come from training with the basketball club, and was wearing knee-length jogging shorts and a T-shirt. There were many students in sports clubs that would go to lessons in that kind of outfit and not wear their uniform for the entire school day, Yuuma was one of them.

"It's a hairstyle."

"A fresh trend, huh?" Yuuma returned with a smile. This was normal too... in fact, Sakuta remembered this conversation, it was exactly the same as the one he remembered from 'yesterday'.

Sakuta fell silent.

"What's up, Sakuta?"

"...Nothing."

"Seriously, what is it?"

"I'm just pissed off you're so popular."

"Huh? What's with that?"

Sakuta said nothing about how this was the second time the day had happened and just followed the conversation along until they reached the classroom.

The four classes Sakuta had that morning, Maths, Physics, English, and Japanese, along with the topics covered were also identical to yesterday. Even the Maths teacher sing-songing "This'll be on your exam", the Physics teacher's

lame jokes, the English teacher's "Listen to me, Mister Azusagawa" and the lipstick on the Japanese teacher's collar were all the same as Sakuta had experienced 'yesterday'.

As time passed, Sakuta's doubts began to solidify into conviction.

Just my memories returned to yesterday.

That concept turned the seemingly peaceful scenes of the classrooms into something eerie. Was it the world that had gone mad, or Sakuta himself?

"It's the world, obviously," he said to himself.

His body felt entirely normal, grounded in reality, with nothing making it seem like he was in a dream.

Still wrestling with this, lunch arrived.

"If today is yesterday..."

Sakuta had an important promise to fulfil that lunch break, and so to make sure of that, he left the second year classroom.

Ten minutes later, Sakuta was sitting within an open classroom on the third floor of the school. The sea was visible from the window, and sitting across the desk from him was Sakurajima Mai, a third-year student and his senior.

She had a cool expression on her beautiful face. Her looks would put actresses to shame... actually, she was an actress herself, a performer with pure talent that had acted since her childhood. She was a celebrity with nationwide fame. For the last year or so, she had been on a hiatus but had recently resumed her activities.

Atop the desk between them was a lunch that she had made for Sakuta, the same food that he had eaten the day before.

Seasoned and fried chicken, fried eggs, seaweed and simmered beans, and potato salad garnished with cherry tomatoes.

Item by item, he used his chopsticks to ferry them to his mouth to taste. They were slightly under-seasoned, but they all had gentle flavours. It wasn't just the appearance, the taste itself was the same as in his memories.

In utter confusion at what was happening, Sakuta didn't say a word.

"Does it not taste good?"

"Hm?"

Sakuta raised his head in response to Mai's voice, meeting her frowning eyes. She wasn't hiding her displeasure in the slightest and her glare was beating into him. Lost in thought, Sakuta had completely forgotten to give his impressions of the lunch. Or rather, because he had the memory of having done so, he'd thought that he had already.

"It's really tasty," he assured her.

"It doesn't look like you think that at all."

"It really is. So much so I want to eat it every day."

"I won't be taken in by some Showa-style proposal. What exactly were you thinking while you were eating my lunch?"

Mai was sharp.

"I was just chewing over how happy being able to eat your cooking made me."

He didn't think he should speak to Mai about what was going on in this situation. He himself didn't really know what was going on, so telling Mai his vague impressions like that would just make her worry needlessly.

"Hmmm," Mai noised doubtfully.

"Mai-san, can I ask you something strange?"

"Something perverted?" Kaede had done the same, why did everyone always jump to that, it was vexing in the extreme. "I won't tell you what colour underwear I'm wearing."

"I'm enjoying myself just imagining that, so it's fine."

"Uwah, you creep," he'd meant it as a joke, but Mai recoiled, "so, what was the weird thing?"

"What am I to you, Mai-san?"

“Just a cheeky junior,” she answered without a moment’s hesitation, making sure to emphasise the ‘just’ to bother Sakuta.

“...I see. Then what do you think you are to me?”

“A beauty... that you have an unrequited love for, your very kind senpai that you long for from the bottom of your heart.”

“That’s right,” as he spoke he ferried some egg to his mouth and chewed on it. It was an awful shame, but the relationship between them had returned to what it was before, even though she had agreed to go on a date with him before.

They should have been boyfriend and girlfriend, but he had regressed back to being a cheeky junior. However, if some strange phenomenon was getting in the way of Sakuta’s romance, he just had to get another date with Mai.

He couldn’t start sulking at a setback that was this minor, surrender was unthinkable.

“That really was a strange question, seriously, why?” Mai looked doubtfully at him.

“I thought I should make sure I know what the situation is before going forwards,” Sakuta dodged the question with what seemed like a plausible reason. He hadn’t lied, he really did want to know what was going on with this incomprehensible situation.

“I sort of doubt it,” Mai said as she narrowed her eyes, peering at his face.

“More importantly, Mai-san.”

“Don’t avoid the topic.”

“I love you, please go out with me,” Sakuta continued as if he couldn’t hear her.

Mai kept staring steadily at him.

“I said don’t avoid the topic.”

“I’d rather you didn’t ignore my confession too.”

“I’m tired of hearing it though.”

“I see... it’s a failed love then. I guess I’ll have to look for someone else then.”

“Hey, wa-”

“Thank you for everything until now,” he interrupted her with a polite bow and a deep, disappointed sigh of unrequited love.

“I-I didn’t say no... What, are you giving up!?” Mai glared at him with a pout.

“You will then?”

“Ugh... you’re so cheeky even though you’re just you.”

“You will?” He asked again, not giving up.

“...Yeah,” she answered in a barely audible voice with a small nod, “I will.”

Then, as if to hide her embarrassment, Mai wordlessly stuffed a fried egg in her mouth. It was such an adorable act that Sakuta felt a chill go through his body.

“Mai-san.”

“W-what?”

“Can I hug you?”

“What’s your reason,” Mai asked guardedly, her eyes upturned as she peeked at him.

“Because you’re really cute right now.”

“No then, absolutely not.”

“Ehh?”

“You look like you’d just use that and push me down... Besides, that’s not something I can just say ‘yeah, sure’ to.”

Mai’s grumblings continued from there.

Their lunch date drew to a close with the warning bell for classes and the pair of them parted to their respective classrooms.

During his journey, Sakuta saw someone familiar on one of the landings on the staircase he took. She had a short bob-cut as was currently in vogue, and a faint dusting of makeup on her cheeks to add a hint of colour, giving a soft

impression of her overall expression.

Her name was Koga Tomoe.

She was a student in the year below Sakuta that had mistaken him for a pervert. The meeting had left an impression so he could remember her name. At the time, he had just been trying to help a lost child find her mother, an act purely out of the kindness of his heart, but even so, she had yelled 'Drop dead, you lolicon pervert!' and given him a sharp kick to the backside.

She was the same person, but seemed to have her head meekly down. Looking more closely, he saw that she was standing in front of someone. A tall, slim boy. He was still well built and was probably in a sports club. He had brown hair, and had trodden down the heels of his indoor shoes. His uniform was rather worn, so he was probably a third-year, the quintessential good looking guy.

"Maesawa-senpai... what did you want to talk about?" Tomoe looked up nervously. Apparently, the male was called Maesawa.

"Say, would you like to go out with me?"

"Eh!?"

"You don't want to?"

"A-ah, um, uh... let me think about it for a while," Tomoe replied in disarray.

"Got it, I'll wait for your answer," Maesawa replied smoothly before climbing the stairs. Bumping into him would be bothersome, so Sakuta quickly stepped out into the corridor.

"She's popular. Well, she's cute," normally Sakuta would have hoped it ended poorly, but was in the mood to celebrate others' happiness today. After all, he'd gotten Mai to agree to date him. "Now... if only tomorrow comes, things'll be perfect."

That was Sakuta's greatest worry right now.

That night, Sakuta had tired of doing the same thing, so decided to put an idea into practice, an all-nighter.

When he had woken that morning, it was to the day before, so what would

happen if he didn't sleep? So all he would have to do is not sleep and wait until tomorrow.

When it reached two in the morning, Sakuta bit back a yawn as he turned the TV on for a distraction. A football match was playing out on the screen. The players were wearing dark blue shirts, so they were the Samurai Blue, Japan's national team, and their first string as well.

"Seriously, they're playing two days running..." Even if they had a packed schedule, the rules should mean they had at least three days between each match... "Hmm?"

Something drew Sakuta's attention. As he watched the match develop, he realised what it was.

"I've seen this," he murmured to himself.

It was just before the first half finished... Number 10 took a pass in the centre and dribbled the ball rapidly up the pitch into the opposing team's half. As he dodged two players, one of their opponents kicked him from behind. The whistle blew just a little before the penalty area, giving Japan a chance at a free kick.

It was the same scene he had watched that morning on the news highlights. But the word LIVE was emblazoned across the upper right of the screen, so what was being shown was a satellite transmission from the match as it happened at that very moment, on the opposite side of the Earth.

"...That's a funny joke." He rushed back to his room to check the clock. Together with the time of ten minutes past two in the morning, the date 'June 27th' was displayed on its face.

Sakuta didn't say a word. He had let his guard down, thinking it was already tomorrow, and instead returned to yesterday.

Going back to the living room, Sakuta watched the match. At the referee's whistle, Number 4 took a run up and kicked the ball. The ball would find its home in that net... but just as that seemed inevitable, the powerful shot rebounded out onto the field from the crossbar, where it was swept up and cleared by a tall opposing defender, denying Japan the point.

“Huh? What?” Things had gone differently than Sakuta had thought, and he remembered a conversation he had had with his friend, Futaba Rio.

“So, it’s like... if the Japanese football team have a match and if I just check the news then they won, but if I went and watched they lost?”

“You should never watch football again for the sake of our team. Don’t look twice.”

That was when they were talking about something like... observation having an influence on the result, he thought.

“No, there’s no way...”

Just watching the match wouldn’t make Japan lose.

Practically praying for them, Sakuta kept watching the match until the final whistle, supporting them. Japan couldn’t make up their one point lag and finished the game that way, losing with a score of 0-1.

The newscaster and live commentator looked back on several of the team’s near misses. Speaking of how the team had the bad habit of not following through on the decisive moments... it was a weak point of the Japanese team that was often talked about.

The newscaster informed Sakuta about how the team now had to win the next match they had with a veteran country to get out of the group leagues.

“I’ll have to speak to Futaba about this tomorrow... I guess it’s today actually, but also yesterday...”

Sakuta could do nothing but hold his head in his hands as he sat alone in the living room in the depths of the night.

2

In the end, Sakuta realised that his vigil was meaningless and so slept soundly until the morning... where he still hadn’t given up and stubbornly turned the TV on, where Japan’s narrow defeat was being broadcast again.

“It’s really not my fault, right?”

With an oddly guilty conscience, Sakuta left thirty minutes earlier than usual.

A mere thirty minutes made the neighbourhood seem strangely different, like the air was somewhat cleaner, and with an odd change to the people milling around Fujisawa Station. There seemed like there were more workers. At his normal time, there were usually more uniform-clad students.

The familiar ride on the Enoden made that all the more apparent with the lack of passengers.

Obviously, the path from Shichirigahama Station to the school was empty. The passengers alighting at the station didn't number more than Sakuta himself. In rush hour, Minegahara students would form a column and parade along the road.

It felt like another place entirely.

Sakuta changed into his indoor shoes in the deserted entrance hall. The lack of people changed the atmosphere of the school, it was dead quiet and could probably be called tranquil.

As he took in those differences, Sakuta passed by the stairs and headed for the physics lab.

"Futaba, you here?" He questioned as he opened the door.

The girl in question was in front of the board. She was a petite girl, wearing a white coat on top of her uniform. This was one of Sakuta's only two friends... Futaba Rio.

She didn't spare Sakuta a glance and instead gave a melancholic sigh. Regardless, Sakuta took a seat opposite her across the desk.

On the surface between them was a beaker with toast placed atop it, and a coffee cup with steam curling from it. The toast had dark lines in it from the grill. Apparently, she was about to have breakfast. The science club was a little *too* laid back with Rio as its only member. Rio bit into the piece of toast in her hands, releasing the scent of warm bread with a crunch.

"Say," Sakuta started.

"No."

"I didn't even say anything yet," he protested.

"You've gone out of your way to come here so early, it's going to be something irritating, right?"

She really was sharp, he thought. But then again, anyone would know something was wrong in this situation.

"I come bearing news of a fascinating phenomenon."

"And that's exactly what I mean by irritating," Rio waved him off, unreachable, "go away."

Rio nibbled angrily at the crust of her toast. She was normally dispassionate, but she was particularly prickly today so was probably in a bad mood in the first place.

"What about you actually, did something happen?" Sakuta was concerned about it, so asked after her first.

"Why do you think that?" Rio finally looked at him, her eyes peering vigilantly from behind the lenses of her glasses.

"Cause you're pissed."

"I'm not..." but as she denied it, she seemed to give up on evading the question and gave a long sigh, "Well, I guess lettering you laugh at it is better than just worrying about it alone."

Rio seemed to be muttering to herself as she looked off into the distance.

"The hell?"

She seemed unsure whether to be positive or negative about it.

"I rode the train with Kunimi this morning."

"Did he try and grope you?" Sakuta asked, his gaze inevitably dropping to her full breasts.

"Kunimi wouldn't do that."

"Stop looking at me like you want to say 'unlike you'."

"Don't look then," Rio said as she moved sideways to try and hide her chest.

She obviously didn't like it, so Sakuta decided to make as much effort as he could to not look.

"And so? You rode the train with Kunimi and then what?"

"Then nothing, I just... I just dislike myself for being happy that a boy with a girlfriend spoke to me." Rio said with a self-deprecating smirk.

"That's just a girlish concern."

"And if *you* had spoken to me, it would have just been a fly buzzing in my ear."

"Was that really necessary?"

It definitely wasn't in his opinion, but then if he could anger her out of her funk, it didn't really matter.

"I guess I'm getting worse and worse."

Rio put the last of the crust in her mouth and took a long draught from her coffee cup before letting out a deep breath.

"What if you just say it?" Sakuta suggested.

"Say what?" Rio asked in turn, trying to slip past the question even though she knew exactly what he meant.

"I like you."

"...To who?" She hesitated this time. Even if she asked, she knew what name would leave Sakuta's lips.

"To Kunimi, obviously," Sakuta told her, looking steadily into her eyes so she couldn't avoid it.

Rio pouted silently for a moment, and just when he thought she was going to turn sideways on her chair and look away from him, she spoke sulkily.

"I don't want your logic."

"Sorry."

"You should be."

"Are you going to just keep on like that, Futaba? I think you should do it

before you get worse.”

Sakuta knew that she bothered coming in so early for club activities so she could meet Yuuma. And yet, whether or not she could, she was like this.

“I said I don’t want your logic,” Rio sighed again, deeply enough fill an entire balloon, her expression melancholic, “if I did, it’d bother him.”

“Go ahead and bother him, the chill bastard that he is.”

“I wish I was as insensitive as you, Azusagawa.”

“If you compliment me so much, I’ll start blushing.”

“I rest my case.”

“Men are creatures that rejoice at girls abusing them.”

“That’s just low-lives like you,” she retorted.

“Kunimi’s girlfriend is pretty insensitive too.

She had said ‘I feel sorry for Yuuma, being with an outcast like you’ right to his face. However you looked at that, it was Sakuta people should feel sorry for, for having something like that said to him. Her name was Kamisato Saki. She was in the same class as Sakuta, 2-1, and while not *his* type, she was popular with the boys and known for her looks. She was the core of cute and popular clique in the class. The exact opposite of Rio, who was plain and made a habit of working away in the labs alone.

“Say, Azusagawa.”

“What?”

“You really are insensitive, talking about her.”

“You need desperate measures. If you don’t like it, admit defeat already.”

“Someone like *you* shouldn’t be right.”

Rio knew that that was the only solution. She knew that but didn’t put it into practice, because if she put it into words, it would be over.

“I’m the only one that would say things like that.”

“That you yourself admit that just makes you even worse,” Rio smiled in faint

amusement, her mood seeming to have changed some, “What did you want to speak about then?”

“I’m worried that tomorrow will never come.”

“There’s no bright future waiting for you anyway, so that’s fine isn’t it?”

He’d given a straight answer, but got a verbal shot in the gut as a result.

“It’s not even slightly fine. I have a rosy future ahead of me.” He’d start dating Mai this afternoon, so it was no exaggeration to call it a rosy future. “Anyway, today is yesterday and yesterday’s today.”

“Could you actually tell me in a way a human can understand?”

“I’m a human too,” he defended.

“Even though you’re a low-life pig?”

“Hey, that’s... ah, whatever. Uhm...” Sakuta gave up arguing and started explaining the bizarre things that had happened to him from the beginning.

Five minutes later, when Sakuta had finished his explanation, Rio let out a sleepy yawn.

“So, what do you think, Futaba?”

“This is what they’d call Middle School Syndrome.”

“I’m in *high* school though.”

“Fine, it’s High School Syndrome then.”

“Man, that’s lazy.”

Rio was acting like it was all too much effort. She brewed herself another cup of coffee, and drank it on her own.

“If it’s not some delusion, then is it that Adolescence Syndrome that you love so much?” Rio suggested, once more in a lazy tone of voice.

“I don’t love it at all.”

Adolescence Syndrome was the general name of a set of strange phenomena that were discussed on the net, false rumours of ‘reading minds’, ‘having psychometry’ and other such occultish things. No one *seriously* believed it. But,

Sakuta had experienced several things similar to that. This might be the same, he couldn't think of any other explanation.

"Anyway, do something would you," Sakuta appealed.

"It's *you* that's going to have to do something."

"Why's that?"

"It certainly seems that I and the other seven billion people on the planet don't think that it's the third time today has happened."

Rio's sidelong glance at the grounds outside indicated the baseball team running around. They were dripping with sweat and certainly didn't seem to think that this was the third time. If they *did*, then they wouldn't be steadily working on their training.

"And this is about when I panic."

Rio had been using her phone and now showed the screen of search results. The keywords she had used were 'June 27th', 'third time', and 'repeating'. Unfortunately, there were no real hits.

"And so, I think this is probably an instance of Adolescence Syndrome caused by you," Rio spoke smoothly, giving Sakuta the unpleasant news.

"I'm not really mentally unstable enough for Adolescence Syndrome, and I'm not really under any stress." Those were the things suggested on the internet as causes of Adolescence Syndrome. The high stress from reality being against a person, or the illusion thereof, was the most likely explanation. In essence, it was an escape from reality.

"Well, it's fine if you're not self-aware," apparently Rio was certain that Sakuta was causing it, "whatever the cause, if you've got any other ideas as to what's going on, go ahead and say them."

"What do you mean?"

"If your explanation is everything, then I think you're looping through time."

"Yeah, that's about right," he answered.

Time-loops themselves were fairly common in Sci-Fi stories.

“It might be better if you didn’t get caught up in that concept.”

“Why?”

“There’s a lot of problems with returning to the past,” seeing as she didn’t say that it was impossible meant that there was some theory for it, “the multiple days that are all ‘June twenty-seventh’ that you experience might seem like looking into the future from before that.”

Rio had come out with an outrageous statement. It didn’t seem like words that would come from a girl that had said it was difficult to go to the past.

“That sounds like you’re easily accepting clairvoyance.”

“It’s far more likely than returning to the past.”

“Seriously?”

“All that said, this is an idea from before quantum mechanics came into use... back from classical physics.” Sakuta made a noise of consideration at Rio’s words. “Have you heard of Laplace’s Demon?”

“Unfortunately I’m not acquainted with any demons.”

“If you don’t know, that’s fine... Everything that exists within this universe falls under the same laws of physics, that’s fine, right?”

“Yeah, that’s just physics, right?”

“It is. If you put those laws into formulae and carry out the calculations, you can predict the future state of a system.”

It was a simple explanation, but it didn’t seem to be the case in reality and so Sakuta cocked his head to the side.

“To put it clearly, if you knew the position and momentum of every atom... their mass and velocity that is, with those you could use classical formulae to derive their future state. It uses things that you learn in high school.”

It was awfully unfortunate but Sakuta, despite going to the same school as Rio, didn’t have the foggiest idea what she was talking about. There were a myriad of questions he wanted to ask to check things.

“All the atoms must be an absolutely huge number,” he started with. The

number must be high enough you could call it infinite.

“It is.”

“So is it even possible to know all their positions and momenta?” It was hard to figure out how many grains of rice went into a rice-ball, let alone anything more.

“At the very least, back then... in the nineteenth century, the physicists couldn’t do so. Even if they had been able to grasp all that information, calculating the results of the formulae from that vast amount of data would take a corresponding amount of time. So predicting a second in the future would take more than a second, so they couldn’t predict the near future.”

“I get that.”

Modern computers would probably find it impossible too.

“So, the physicist Laplace thought of a fanciful existence that could do so.”

“And that’s Laplace’s Demon?”

Rio nodded slowly before continuing.

“That demon has the ability to instantaneously know the positions and momenta of all atoms in existence, and to use that information to calculate the future. In other words, Laplace’s Demon can see everything in the future.”

“Hmmmm,” Sakuta noised.

“You don’t look like you agree.”

“Nah, calculating the future would be fine, but then wouldn’t our thoughts change it? Can you call that foresight?”

“Ah, so that’s what it was.”

“You can’t predict emotions, right?”

“You can,” Rio refuted clearly.

“Huh?” Was the only thing that could leave Sakuta’s mouth.

“Human bodies are made of atoms as well. If you know each of their positions and momenta, you can derive how the brain will change or how the person will

feel.”

“I see... I wish I hadn’t asked.”

“If you follow through, you won’t in the end.”

“Really? But from what you said... if you take emotions into account, then knowing the position and momentum of every atom at that moment, you could predict how things would develop, right?”

“Right.”

“Then wouldn’t that mean that the future was set?” If you knew all of the positions and momenta of atoms then everything else was just a matter of time, there was no need to measure anything else. In other words, nothing but time would change. Physics and maths would set fate in stone.

“I’m impressed you realised that, well done, Azusagawa!” Rio praised him as if praising a child. “That’s exactly right, that’s what our conversation so far would imply.”

“Then what? Whether or not I study for it, I’ll get the same mark on the exam next week?”

“Not quite. The marks are certainly set. But it’s not from the choice between studying or not, really, whether you study or not itself is already decided.”

“Hmm, ah, yeah.”

The future being set *would* mean that.

“Let’s say that you decided ‘the future is set, I won’t bother trying’ when you heard what I told you.”

“Even then, wouldn’t Laplace’s Demon know I’d hear that and then try and fight against it?”

“Exactly.”

It was complicated, but he got it. But then...

“Then aren’t our fates predestined?” He asked.

“Have you forgotten what I started with?”

“That you were super happy Kunimi talked to you.”

“Die.”

“Umm... that it was ‘from before quantum mechanics came into use’, right?”

“If you remember, then don’t take the mickey.” Rio glared slightly peevishly at him. A girlish expression unthinkable from her normal frank attitude. “I explained Schrödinger’s cat to you before.”

“The one where the cat could be either alive or dead before you open the box?”

That was what he had heard when he was asking about what was happening with Mai’s instance of Adolescence Syndrome.

“Well, good job on remembering that much.”

“Praise me more.”

Rio ignored him and continued.

“Do you remember that I explained that in quantum mechanics that the positions of atoms can only be determined probabilistically?”

“I do now. To fix the position, you have to observe it... That’s it, right?”

“It is. So, that observation is the key, to see you need light.”

Rio took out a torch from a drawer and shone it on a baseball on the desk.

“That’s finding out the position of the atom then?”

“Right, but atoms are very small, so if they’re hit with light, their velocity changes.” Rio rolled the ball across the desk to the edge, where it fell and bounced twice, coming to rest at the chair leg. “And so, if finding an atom’s position changes its velocity, which means that to know the velocity, and thus momentum means that the position becomes probabilistic again. There’s no way to know both.”

“That’s irritating.”

“And now it’s clear that Laplace’s Demon was eradicated by quantum mechanics, which is proof that the future isn’t set. Aren’t you relieved now?”

Honestly, he couldn't really feel relieved. Sakuta himself didn't really understand quantum mechanics and couldn't put his confidence in something he didn't really comprehend.

"But quantum mechanics is about human observation, right?"

"Of course it is."

"Then-"

"I know what you want to say, that Laplace's Demon is fundamentally beyond humans, so maybe it can know both," Rio opened her mouth and forestalled him with a confident gaze.

"Yeah, that's just what I wanted to say."

"You can decide just how much better the demon is than humans."

Rio seemed to have gone through this conversation just to say that, and at the same time was saying that Sakuta himself was Laplace's Demon.

"I'm not a wicked demon like that."

"Just make sure you don't get dissected."

"I'll be fine as long as you don't sell me out to some shady group of scientists."

"If I did that, maybe we wouldn't be able to meet anymore," Rio said with a glance down to her phone on the desk, "if you insist it's not you, you need to find the real Laplace's Demon."

"Where do you think it will be?"

They weren't taught how to find demons in their lessons at least.

"The demon, along with you, will have memories of the repeating days, right? Then they might well take different actions than they did the last June twenty-seventh I would guess."

"Ahh, I see..." Rio was exactly right, noticing that would make it fairly likely that the person would try to act against it, or be bewildered at the situation.

Although with that said, he had no real goal, not knowing where to search.

Sakuta shouldered his bag and stood, reaching out a hand to help Rio up, but she just said.

“Go ahead.”

“Thanks then,” he said, and as he got to the door and went to leave, he remembered something and stopped there, “Ah, right, Futaba?”

“What?”

“If today happens again, do you want me to make it so you don’t meet Kunimi this morning?”

In that case, Rio wouldn’t have looked so melancholic that morning.

Rio remained silent in thought for a moment.

“You don’t need to worry,” she said with a faint smile, “I’ll be doing something myself about it.”

“That’s right, you owe me a lot, so I’ll need to make sure you pay me back.”

“I’ll remember the interest too.”

Sakuta left the physics lab behind as Rio watched him with a cynical smile.

3

“You need to find the real Laplace’s Demon.”

Rio had told him that, but where on Earth did he begin? He didn’t have even an estimation of who the demon would be, and on top of that, there was no guarantee that it would be anywhere near him. At worst, it could be someone that lived on the other side of the world.

“It’s the end if they are...”

He was a mere high school student, he didn’t have the slack in their budget to cross the world or even have a passport. His prospects were grim. Actually, bleak would perhaps be a better term.

His mood had plummeted.

Even so, he headed to the third-floor classroom when lunch time rolled

around to fulfil the promise to have lunch with Mai in the empty room.

Right now, the most important thing to Sakuta was dating Mai. Even that was being wiped from existence. Once more, that time would come for him to eat Mai's handmade food and confess to her. It had at least the one saving grace of being enjoyable in and of itself.

Sakuta cheerfully slid the classroom door open. At which point, he heard sounds from within what he was sure was a deserted classroom. Looking, he could see a skirt-clad backside in the shadows of the teacher's desk. Apparently, they were trying to hide themselves. A strong sense of foreboding ran down his back.

This hadn't happened the first or second times. On both occasions, Sakuta had arrived right at the start of lunch, followed slightly later whereupon they had an enjoyable lunch. Nobody had interrupted them, and Sakuta hadn't encountered anyone but Mai in the room.

And so this was a different development than the first or second times he had lived the day, the influence of someone taking different actions.

Rio's words from that morning passed through his mind.

"The demon, along with you, will have memories of the repeating days, right? Then they might well take different actions than they did the last June twenty-seventh I would guess."

And then in front of his eyes was a situation that fit those words to a T.

"There you are, Laplace's Demon," spoke Sakuta, and in response, the hiding girl timidly peeked her head out, like some tiny animal edging out of their nest and checking for danger.

Sakuta recognised that face. It was framed by a trending short bob cut and had large, round eyes and a dusting of makeup that gave a soft, cute impression. A 'with-it- aura emanated from her entire body, showing her to be a high school girl that fit the image conjured by the term, *the* high school girl.

She had her smartphone, with a salmon-pink case, in one hand, and her mouth was open to begin speaking. This was the first year, Koga Tomoe.

She was slight, even for a girl and there seemed to be not much to her, so she looked rather weak to be called a demon. She was an imp at best, a petite devil.

The sea breeze blowing in from the open window made Tomoe's hair and skirt sway slightly before she broke the silence.

"Satou Ichirou."

"That's an alias I use to hide from the world," Sakuta replied, surprised that she had remembered the fake name he had given when he first introduced himself. Apparently, she was the type that remembered someone's name when they met, unlike Sakuta.

"...You're Azusagawa-senpai, yeah?" She asked, with an uncertain upward glance.

"Azusagawa Sakuta, second year."

"I am Koga Tomoe. A first year," she said, switching to a forced polite tone, giving a meeker impression.

"You can talk casually, we're backside-kicking-buddies after all."

"Forget about that!" Tomoe's cheeks puffed up into a pout, back to the image Sakuta had of her. Perhaps remembering the pain from then, Tomoe's hands covered her backside, taking a pose that didn't seem to fit an underclassman.

"Koga, I've got an awkward question."

"What?"

"How many times have you lived today?"

Tomoe's eyes opened wide at Sakuta's question, darting left and right in both surprise and a little unease.

"It's my third," he offered.

At that, she gave a nod and then said:

"It's my third too," raising three fingers. At that moment, her expression instantly morphed into tears and before Sakuta could even react carried on with, "It... wasn't just me."

Tears began to fall from her face and she fell to the floor out of either relief or

being overwhelmed.

“What the hell is this!?” She yelled.

“Who knows.”

“Why is the day repeating!?”

“I dunno.”

“Why don’t you know!?”

“I can’t help not knowing things.”

Her earlier relief went back to unease.

“I thought you could help me, give me back my tears!”

“Just go drink some water from the tap.”

“What do I do now?” She asked, Sakuta actually wanted to ask that himself.

“What’m I gonna do?” She asked again, in an unfamiliar tone. She didn’t seem to understand the cause of the situation she was in, you could call her clueless.

“Why are you so calm!?” She demanded now, crapping hold of his collar and shaking him.

“Is panicking going to help?”

“It won’t, but it’s natural to.”

“Is it?”

“It is, you’re off, Senpai. I guess a deviant that confesses in front of the whole school would be though.”

“I think calling someone else ‘off’ right to their face is plenty off as well.”

“Shut uuup.”

“Just in case you *do*, do you have any idea what’s going on?”

“Not a clue.”

“Nothing?”

“I-I don’t know at all.”

“You’re useless.”

“No, that’s you!” She insisted.

“You had anything unpleasant or worrying on your mind recently?”

“Why do I have to tell *you* about that? Ah, a message.” She immediately looked at her phone.

“Because... this seems like it’s Adolescence Syndrome. If it’s caused by an unstable mental state from you, solving that cause should solve this too.”

“Adolescence Syndrome... Senpai, are you all there?” She asked mockingly, her gaze still fixed on her phone as she slid her fingers around the screen, busily tapping away. “That’s just some rumour online. I can’t believe you believe it.”

The reason Sakuta believed it existed was because of his unbelievable experiences of such phenomena in the past.

The instance that involved his sister Kaede was the first. Just seeing the cruel posts and messages from her classmates caused bruises on her skin like she had been struck, and he had seen the cuts that looked like she had been sliced with a knife with his own eyes.

A month prior, he’d seen the circumstances around Mai, and forgotten her. And now, this situation followed the trend.

“I know how you feel, but after living the same day three times, I doubt that Adolescence Syndrome is just an urban legend.

“Ugh, that’s right...” There was a limit to escaping reality and asking yourself if you were dreaming. With Tomoe in the same situation, it was getting more and more realistic. It might just be seeing the future as Rio suggested, but it certainly felt physically real.

“Also, quit messing while we’re talking,” Sakuta scolded as he yanked the phone from Tomoe’s hands.

“Ah, give it back!” Tomoe shouted as she bounced and reached for the phone where Sakuta was holding it above her head, out of her short reach, “I won’t talk and use it!”

She was admitting her fault, so he returned it.

“Here.”

Like a cautious wild animal, she darted her hand forward and seized the phone, immediately starting to use it in silence.

The silence stretched between them for several moments.

“So you’re stopping the talking?”

“Quiet, you’re distracting me.”

“Man, you girls.”

And so, Sakuta waited for about twenty seconds.

“What was it then?” Tomoe asked, finally looking up from the screen.

“You had anything unpleasant or worrying on your mind recently? It might give us a hint on how to break through the twenty-seventh.”

“...Hmmm.” She furrowed her brow, thinking seriously, and after a good ten seconds, continued with a slight blush, deadly serious. “I’ve put on some weight.”

Looking at her, Tomoe was rather dainty and slight. She could be called slender in multiple senses of the word.

“W-what are you looking at me like that for?” She questioned tremulously.

“It’s okay. If anything, you’re too thin anyway. If you put some weight on, you might get some meat on that washboard of yours.”

“It all just goes to my stomach and backside.”

Now that she said it, her waist and backside were both a reasonable thickness.

“Apparently they grow bigger if you fondle them.”

“I’ve already tried that,” she insisted, her hands unconsciously cupping her chest, headless of Sakuta’s gaze.

“Give up then. Guys don’t love girls for their chest anyway. Anything else? Something less pointless?”

“Swimming classes are starting so this isn’t pointless at all! I don’t have a bust, no hourglass figure, summer is hell...”

She seemed to be about to continue when her eyes went wide again and she went silent before letting out a small sound as she looked behind Sakuta... towards the corridor.

“H-hide!” She insisted, dragging him by the arms and pushing him under the teacher’s desk.

“What are you playing at?”

“Just do it!”

Tomoe followed him into the narrow space under the desk. Practically straddling Sakuta as he lay on the floor.

This was probably some kind of game popular with the first years. Sakuta really didn’t understand the youth.

His questions in mind, he looked at what was happening and could see a boy looking in from the open door. It was the third-year that had confessed to Tomoe on the last today... She’d called him Maesawa-senpai, he thought.

“Pull your head in!”

Tomoe grabbed his face between her hands and pulled him back under.

“He’s looking for you, isn’t he?”

“I think so... but I sent a message saying I had some appointment this lunchtime...”

“An appointment? Doesn’t look like you do,” Sakuta teased liltily.

“That’s sorta what I said.”

In other words, she’d lied to him.

“Quit beating around the bush, go get confessed to.”

“How do you know about that!?”

“I saw you last time.”

Tomoe’s small face was right in front of Sakuta. The breaths coming from her glossy pink lips were tickling his cheeks and he shifted so that there wasn’t any contact between the two of them in awkward places.

The motion startled Tomoe and she let out a slight scream as if she had been jabbed somewhere sensitive, but the cause was different. It was her phone vibrating in her hand, the backlight coming to life with another message.

“What kind of play is this supposed to be?” Sakuta asked.

Concentrating on her phone, Tomoe didn’t reply.

While he was waiting for her to finish, his gaze drifted down and he noticed her skirt had ridden up and he could see the white cloth at the base of her right leg.

“Oi, Koga.”

“Later.”

“I can see your underwear.”

“Now’s not the time,” she dismissed his warning.

“I don’t get girls,” he lamented.

Apparently, sending some message was more important than her sense of virtue. With no other recourse, he reached out and fixed her skirt for her. Now all he could see were her thighs.

In the meanwhile, she seemed to have finished her texting.

“Why are we hiding?” He asked.

There shouldn’t have been any need for Sakuta to hide as well.

“Because... Rena-chan looks up to Maesawa-senpai,” Tomoe answered in a quiet voice, her gaze saying ‘you should get it now’. Sakuta, on the other hand, didn’t understand at all and so of course answered with:

“Huh?”

Tomoe parroted him before questioning him.

“How can you not get it?”

“Because you’ve not really explained it.”

“Well, um... I often go with Rena-chan to watch the basketball club practice.”

“And who’s this Rena-chan again?”

She was probably some nationally famous actor or something.

“My friend... Kashiba Rena-chan. She said he’s handsome and... I just go with her...”

At that point, Tomoe started mumbling.

“And you’re more his type?”

“...Y-yeah,” she said with a slow nod.

“And do you like him?”

“No... I don’t like popular guys.”

“Then go get confessed to and reject him.”

There was no need to keep hiding, she just needed to reject him. The cultural festival was approaching, so it would be fitting for a handsome guy that seemed like he’d suddenly start a band to get rejected.

“That’d definitely get me ostracised! He’s the one that Rena-chan...’s friend likes, you know?”

“Huh? What’s that about, it’s not like you’d be dating.”

“Obviously I can’t get confessed to by him.”

“I don’t get what you mean.”

“I promised Rena-chan that I’d support her... and then if I got confessed to, that’d be completely missing the point,” Tomoe’s voice grew serious, “seriously, what do I do...?”

Her face had paled and it certainly seemed like a crisis to her, from the bottom of her heart.

“Did you give him the doe-eyes and seduce him that way?”

“Of course not!”

“We’ll get caught if you yell.”

She was taken aback and now, albeit too late, covered her mouth with her hands.

“A-anyway, you get it now, right?”

He understood what she'd said, but couldn't reconcile her sense of values.

"Not in the slightest."

"Jeez, there's no point talking to you!" Tomoe rose with her emotions. But of course, they were under the desk so she had to watch her head.

"Ah, wait..."

Sakuta's immediate warning was too late and Tomoe's head thunked into the desk. The impact was strong enough that it lifted off two of its legs, tipping away from the board.

Tomoe was too slow to reach for it when she noticed, her hand whirled through the air, and the desk fell over with an almighty crash.

Tomoe herself fell over, her feet caught in Sakuta's legs where he was lying on the floor and she lost her balance, falling with a cry.

Reflexively, Sakuta put his arms out to catch her. She was incredibly light, and definitely didn't need to worry about her weight.

"Honestly, you..."



He was going to finish it with 'should calm down a little', but couldn't end the sentence, because as he spoke he saw someone.

He met the gaze of a boy in the doorway, the third-year he had seen earlier. Maesawa-senpai, who was apparently in the basketball club.

The boy's expression was unclear, with hints of confusion. It was understandable, from his point of view, Sakuta and Tomoe were holding each other on the floor of an empty classroom.

"So this is what you mean. You have crap taste."

Apparently, he had massively misunderstood things. On top of that, he was being rather rude.

"No, that's not..." Sakuta began to try and explain, but his voice died out as he heard a sound from the other door into the room.

His heart pounded in his chest, an unconscious reaction accompanying his panic. His instincts were screaming at him.

Even without turning to check who had made the noise, Sakuta knew, he knew all too well.

Haltingly, he turned to look.

Just as he thought, Mai was standing there.

There was a paper bag in her hand, containing the lunch she had made him. He even knew what was in that lunch, seasoned and fried chicken, fried eggs, seaweed and simmered beans, and potato salad garnished with cherry tomatoes...

He knew all of that, but he was also sure that he wouldn't be able to sample them today with a look at Mai's eyes.

She hadn't moved a single step from the door and was watching him with cold eyes. Watching as he held Tomoe... Watching with an expression of complete disinterest...

"This is a misunderstanding," Sakuta tried to give her the cold hard truth. His

mettle was being tested here, all he could do was remain calm and explain the reality of the matter without yelling.

She gave no reply.

He looked her right in the eyes, visually proclaiming his innocence.

But she turned wordlessly on her heel.

“Argh, wait, Mai-san!” He cried, pushing Tomoe to the side and rushing to his feet. Ignoring Tomoe’s own cry of pain as she hit her head on the desk on the floor, “Please let me explain.”

“Don’t talk to me, you lolicon philanderer.”

Those were the only words she spared him before walking away.

“Argh, she’s seriously mad.”

They definitely wouldn’t be eating together now, and confessing and getting something like ‘yeah, sure’ would be even harder.

He let out a sigh of resignation.

When he checked the other door, Maesawa-senpai had left too. Tomoe was still on the floor so he offered her a hand up.

“T-thanks.”

He then put that hand on her head and messed up her hair in revenge.

“Wah! Hey!” She hurriedly moved away from him and then ran both of her hands through her hair, putting it back in order before glaring at Sakuta. “I get up at six to style that, every day!”

Fashionable girls had really early mornings. He then ignored Tomoe and took a deep breath.

Panicking wouldn’t help. There was no meaning in getting worked up about what had happened. If he took the situation as it was, he should naturally be able to find a solution.

“Well, whatever. I’m probably going to be repeating this anyway.”

Tomoe certainly seemed to be Laplace’s Demon, but he couldn’t really say

they had gotten to the bottom of it. Naturally, they hadn't found any methods to begin solving it, so as far as Mai went, if tomorrow... or rather the fourth today went well then all would be solved. He would just need to be careful he didn't end up holding Tomoe.

Nothing more was needed, it was a wonderful solution.

But come morning, Sakuta would regret the judgement he made here and now...

Chapter 2 — Will Tomorrow's Breeze Blow Tomorrow?

1

The next day found Sakuta standing dumbfounded in the living room. It was a few seconds after he had flipped the TV on for the short time before his toast would spring up.

He'd thought the program would be the same regardless, but there was a happy story on about finding ten-million yen buried in a garden.

"Good morning, today is Saturday the twenty-eighth of June. I think we should start with an astounding story today..."

The announcer was in his early forties and had the typical face of a breakfast show presenter. While he was still calm, his animated speech didn't exactly grate on Sakuta and he just let the report drift in through his ears, so it took several seconds for him to comprehend the words, delivered with no real urgency.

"...He just said the twenty-eighth, right?"

"He did."

At some point in his introspection, his panda-pyjama clad sister Kaede had come to stand next to him and peer at his face.

"He said Saturday, right?"

"He did."

Sakuta gave no reply.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Kaede, pinch my cheek."

"Sure, got it." Kaede said, reaching out her hand and pinching his cheek, hard.

"Ouch."

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Nah, it’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine at all, he thought, if this wasn’t a dream, it was reality, and because it had hurt, that was probably the case. Without even the time to reconsider, tomorrow had come. It wasn’t a normal twenty-eighth of June either. Originally, Mai would have agreed to date him and today would have dawned with them as boyfriend and girlfriend. Yet despite all of that, they weren’t, and Mai had borne witness to a strange misunderstanding. Tomorrow had come in the worst possible way.

“This isn’t funny anymore...”

This was truly the sensation of falling from Heaven to Hell.

Sakuta staggered over to the phone and lifted the receiver.

“Onii-chan?” Questioned Kaede worriedly, only to get an absent-minded word of assurance as Sakuta dialled his friend’s number. Three rings later, the phone connected.

“It’s Azusagawa.”

“What do you want so early on a Saturday?”

Rio’s clear voice showed that she had probably been up for a good while already regardless.

“Build me a time machine,” he said bluntly.

Immediately afterwards, the phone disconnected wordlessly. Maybe she had poor signal, this was why mobiles weren’t worth it, thought Sakuta as he quickly redialled.

...However, regardless of how long he let the phone ring, there was no answer. Apparently, it had actually been intentional.

His persistence was eventually rewarded when she answered on his tenth call.

“If you say something stupid, I’ll hang up,” warned Rio.

“I was deadly serious.”

“I’m in the middle of changing though.”

“How far through are you?” He asked immediately.

“I just need to put my socks on,” she answered.

“Huh, that’s an odd order.”

“It’s a normal order, right?”

“I *start* from my socks you know?”

“That’s odd.”

“It’s normal.”

“So, what did you want?” Rio came back to the target.

“Remember what we talked about yesterday? That thing about the day repeating.”

“Congrats, you escaped yesterday.”

“In the worst way, yeah.”

“You found Laplace’s Demon?”

“Well... Probably, she’s a first-year at our school.”

It was galling, but he had no recourse but to accept this as reality and look forward. First of all, he needed to think on what had let them escape yesterday.

Repeating the same day over and over would have been unbearable.

There were three main differences between the two loops and the final day. The first went without saying, Sakuta and Mai were no longer dating. There had been the unthinkable misunderstanding and she had been awfully offended...

The second was another matter of romance in Koga Tomoe not being confessed to by Maesawa-senpai.

The third was the football match result, they had won the first two times but lost on the third. Sakuta didn’t want to think that it was his fault for watching it live, but still felt a strange sense of responsibility.

Using these conditions to discover Laplace’s Demon then there was a single conclusion, Koga Tomoe was the true identity of the demon.

“Why do you think that?” Was Rio’s answer when he told her so.

“The culprit is the one that gains the most, that makes it obvious.”

And on top of that, she was the only other person that had experienced the repetition.

“There’s some logic to that.”

Sakuta and the Japanese team had both taken a big hit, and Tomoe had benefited. She herself had said that the confession from Maesawa-senpai was an issue, and that a confession from the boy that her friend was attracted to would be completely ignoring the atmosphere...

Without that confession, Tomoe’s worries were settled for at least the current while. That’s why they had cleared the twenty-seventh and had now arrived on the twenty-eighth.

Sakuta had an impression that this was the case, or at least he knew of no other reason. The problem was, however, this hadn’t truthfully solved anything.

Maesawa-senpai had just misunderstood, once he realised the truth, he would probably confess again. And if that was the trigger for the repetition, the same day would come once more. He should notice that Sakuta and Tomoe didn’t have that kind of relationship. The previous month had seen Sakuta confess to Mai in front of the whole school, and seeing Sakuta and Tomoe normally would show they had no point of contact.

Sakuta solving the issue with Mai and starting dating would do the same.

As he reached that conclusion, Sakuta’s thoughts stopped with the realisation that he had fallen into an incredibly burdensome situation.

“Azusagawa, do you know what this kind of thing is called?”

“Yeah... Checkmate.”

“Good luck then. I’m going to go put my socks on.”

The phone disconnected with a click.

“So your socks are more important than me...?”

After he finished eating his breakfast with Kaede, Sakuta got dressed for the day. He was wearing his school uniform due to the tacit understanding that all the students would attend a morning of classes on Saturdays for half of the month to cover things that they couldn't during the normal classes.

Sometimes odd things like this had to be put in place to make up for the gaps between the national curriculum and the necessary education for the real world.

"I'm off then, Kaede."

"Right, see you later."

Kaede waved him off as Sakuta let loose a grandiose yawn and headed to school.

The world was peaceful, no one was making a thing over the twenty-eighth arriving, and the only differences from a normal day were the lack of office workers and a slightly smaller number of people around the station.

The journey aboard the Enoden from Fujisawa was the same, there were no people making statements like 'it's finally the twenty-eighth', 'I preferred the first twenty-seventh', or 'huh, so it really is the twenty-eighth'.

The classroom was the same too, there were no oddities in the students when he looked at them from his window seat. Staring at them wouldn't accomplish anything, so Sakuta turned his gaze to Shichirigahama beach.

The sunlight was shining on the waves, and there was a beautiful gradient in the sky from blue to white, the perfectly flat line of the horizon stretching between the two.

It was a pleasant scene.

"Hey," he heard a voice.

Anyway, he'd go to apologise to Mai later. She probably wouldn't forgive him easily, but there was no other way to break the current deadlock.

"Are you listening?" The voice continued, apparently addressing Sakuta. He looked forward again and saw a girl standing in front of his desk.

She was Kamisato Saki, and was standing with her arms crossed, looking

down at him. She had a strong gaze, carefully done makeup and wore her uniform with the collar pulled down. She stood out within the class and was the focal point of the clique of the most popular girls, along with being Yuuma's girlfriend."

"It's rather rude to ignore me, isn't it?"

"I didn't think that you'd speak to me anymore," he explained.

"What's that supposed to mean? You creep," What did Yuuma see in her, Sakuta wondered. He didn't understand his taste in girls. "Come to the roof after school, I need to talk to you."

Having given her arbitrary demand, Saki returned to her own seat. Around her seat were a group of four girls.

"Did Azusagawa do something?" Asked one of them.

"Poor Saki-chan," commented another, continuing the odd conversation.

Sakuta wanted someone to worry over him as he was being treated like the one in the wrong.

"It's about Yuuma, it's fine," said Saki.

"Ah. Oh yeah, I found this yesterday," one of the girls answered, the topic changing to a fun app they had found the day before.

"This is great!"

"Yeah, let's all do it!"

"Yeah, yeah!"

The group's excited voices reverberated around the classroom from their position in the centre.

There was another group of girls watching them from a distance, with clear expressions of displeasure on their faces. They didn't put their complaints into words though, when it seemed like they might meet the gaze of the other group, they would turn their attention back to their own conversation.

Social situations with girls seemed to be a little more complicated than between boys.

As he considered that, Sakuta suddenly noticed something.

The girls surrounding Saki were a slightly different group than a few days again. He looked around the classroom to ease his foreboding. There was a girl sitting in a seat towards the back of the room, not talking to anyone. She was a girl Sakuta was sure had been sitting with Saki the other day.

Perhaps they'd had a falling out, it wasn't an uncommon sight within the school. He wouldn't normally worry about it, but this time, he couldn't get it out of his mind.

It might have been because she seemed to have a similar feeling about her to Tomoe.

Once the hated first period of English was over, Sakuta stuck his head into Mai's classroom. However, she wasn't there, and nor was her bag at her seat.

After attending the rest of the four lessons that day, he looked in on the third-year class as they were about to leave, and she was indeed absent. When he asked one of the students just in case, he was told that she hadn't come in today by a student holding their laughter in. The confession in front of the entire school was still showing its effects apparently.

"Thank you for telling me," he answered politely before leaving the third-year's floor. As he was switching his shoes by the lockers, he had a feeling he had forgotten something.

"Oh yeah, that," he said to himself. Kamisato Saki had called him to the roof that morning.

"You're late," she scolded him irritably when he arrived on the roof.

"What'd you want then?" He asked bluntly, ignoring her anger. He had work after this, so he didn't have much time and wanted to finish this annoyance quickly.

"I told you to stay away from Yuuma."

"I'm sure I remember you telling me not to *talk* to him," he retorted.

"It's the same thing."

"Ah, the same thing. I won't forget it. Never in my life, probably."

That was how much impact her statement had. It was a rare experience to have someone be so openly hostile. Maybe this kind of thing was what had attracted Yuuma. Calling him up to the roof with none of her usual followers showed immense self-reliance.

“Oh yeah, what’s up with that girl?”

“Huh?”

“That girl that separated off from your group?”

“That’s got nothing to do with you,” she said, even more harshly. She was clearly angry, and it wasn’t directed at Sakuta, it was probably at the girl.

“Did she steal a guy?”

“She did,” She answered. Sakuta had meant it as a joke, but it evidently the truth. Saki’s boyfriend was Yuuma though, and he didn’t think that he would be swayed by another girl so easily. “Not mine,” she clarified, “she sneaked off and played with him on her own.”

Sakuta didn’t really get the details, but he could somewhat understand the general situation from that.

“More importantly, what’s with that girl in the lab?” She asked.

“Huh?”

“What kind of relationship does she have with Yuuma? They talk a lot.”

Even without naming her, she was clearly talking about Rio. He wanted to just quietly set it aside, but the girl had a dangerous look in her eyes. How should he answer?

“Ask Kunimi,” he settled on.

“You get on with her too, yeah?”

“I have no idea what you think’s happening.”

“Just answer!”

“You’re so touchy...” he barely avoided asking if she was on her period, swallowing his words and pausing before continuing with: “Are you constipated, Kamisato?”

“Wah!?”

“I mean, you’re so touchy.”

“Die! Right now!”



Saki's face had gone bright red as she stormed from the roof, slamming the door behind her.

"Eat more fibre," he called after her. Unfortunately though, he didn't think she'd heard his advice.

This time, Sakuta did change his shoes by the lockers and left the school, exiting through the gate and boarding the Fujisawa-bound train from the platform, riding for about fifteen minutes.

Alighting at the terminus of Fujisawa, he bought a curry bread just past the ticket gates and headed to work as he ate.

"Good morning," he greeted the manager, who was standing right by the till, as he entered the family restaurant.

"Morning, good to see you in today."

"You too," answered Sakuta as he suppressed a yawn, moving further inside into the break area. The space behind the lockers here was used as the men's changing room. The women had their own actual changing room, but... well, the world just wasn't fair.

"Hey, morning," said Kunimi Yuuma as he stepped from behind the lockers.

"Sup," Sakuta answered as they swapped places and he began to change.
"Kunimi?"

He stripped off his uniform and put his arms and head through the restaurant uniform.

"Hm?"

"It's irritating so I'll just tell you straight up, your girlfriend came at me again today."

"Man, what a disaster," Kunimi laughed, as if it was happening to someone else.

"You need to choose, me or your girlfriend."

"Hey, what's with giving the two extremes like that? I'll phone her tonight."

“Please do, seriously.”

Sakuta finished undressing from the school uniform and switching to the restaurant’s trousers.

“Oh yeah, Kunimi.”

“What now?”

“There an older guy called Maesawa in the Basketball club?”

“Hm? Yeah, Yousuke-senpai.”

So his full name was Maesawa Yousuke, thought Sakuta to himself before asking: “What kind of person is he?”

“Well, he’s the best at basketball at school.” While Yuuma spoke, Sakuta stepped out into the break room proper as he tied his apron. “He’s fairly popular too.”

“Give me something that’ll make me hate him.”

“What on Earth’s this about?” Kunimi asked with a mix of confusion and amusement. “You have a falling out?”

“It’s hard to explain, but it’s bad for my conscience if I think he’s a good person.”

Though it was an accident, there’d been a strange misunderstanding about his relationship with Tomoe and on top of that, the confession that would have normally happened had not. If he let it lie, it would eventually be discovered, but he still felt a little guilty. Even if the guy had been rather rude.

“Well, I don’t like to speak badly of people, but...” Yuuma said before pausing. Apparently, he really *didn’t* want to gossip about people.

“I get it, he’s got some kind of deviant hobby.”

“I don’t know about that, but he was complaining his girlfriend wouldn’t put out so he was thinking of breaking up... He often insults his ex as well. Going like ‘I hope she doesn’t end up the same’.”

If Yuuma would go as far to say that, then he really must be a worthless senior. Popularity might just be bad for people’s personalities.

“Wait, he has a girlfriend?”

“Yeah, some third year from another school. She’s pretty cute.”

“Who’s cuter, her or Kamisato?”

“Kamisato, obviously.”

She should be thankful that her boyfriend would say something like that. For a moment, Rio’s face floated through his mind and he felt a sense of apology.

“Thanks for the valuable info.”

Thanks to that information, he could probably hate Maesawa-senpai. Sakuta couldn’t understand his nerve, confessing to Tomoe when he already had a girlfriend.

The hour ticked over while they were talking, so the two of them clocked in and headed out onto the restaurant floor.

“Ah, Kunimi-kun, Azusagawa-kun, do you have a moment?” Asked the manager while they were on their way.

“We do,” they answered while turning back to look at him. Standing next to him was a petite girl, she looked rather nervous and was wearing a brand new waitress outfit.

“Koga-san will be working here from today, please get her acquainted with how things go on the floor.”

Sakuta recognised the girl, and Tomoe herself seemed shocked to see his face. Next to him, Yuuma spoke to her: “Huh, you go to our school right?”

“Ah, that’s right, the both of you go to Minegahara High School as well. I’ll leave her with you as your kouhai then, in more ways than one.”

“I’m Kunimi Yuuma, this is Azusagawa Sakuta, we’re both second years... Actually, you know Sakuta, right?” Tomoe glanced sideways, “ah yeah, he said you kicked each others’ backsides, didn’t he?”

Tomoe’s hands immediately flew to cover said body part.

“Why did you tell people about that!?” She protested in bewilderment, with slightly teary eyes.

“I’m not going to keep something that funny to myself.”

“I can’t believe you!”

Tomoe glared while flushing.

“It looks like we won’t get on,” said Sakuta, “I’ll leave looking after her to you, Kunimi.”

“Ah, oi, Sakuta!” Ignoring Yuuma’s calls after him, Sakuta headed out onto the floor first.

Sakuta made up for pushing Tomoe’s training on Yuuma by working harder on the floor that day. He guided customers to their tables, took their orders, and brought their food to their tables as quickly as he could, while standing at the till when there were customers leaving. When he had nothing else to do, he refilled the cups and glasses on the drinks bar.

He caught sight of Tomoe dashing about during the peak hours of her first day of work, working as hard as she could.

She had been given two jobs. The first was to take the crockery back, the other was to re-set empty tables.

Watching her stretch out to wipe over the large tables was rather charming. However, there were several unavoidable annoyances, his heart was in his throat as he watched her clatter away with two trips’ worth of crockery. She actually dropped some and it was only due to Yuuma’s skilful catch that the plates didn’t shatter on the floor. If it had been Sakuta teaching her, those plates would probably be in pieces.

The dinner rush passed and the pace calmed significantly. There were a few tables that remained empty now, and the sky had gone completely dark as the clock hands ticked past eight o’clock.

Sakuta had gone further inside for an order, and Yuuma was in the middle of instructing Tomoe on how to deal with the cutlery in front of the kitchen counter. They worked away while idly chatting.

“Koga-san, why did you start working?” Asked Yuuma.

“I’ve got a lot of expenses, my phone, my clothes... What about you, Kunimi-

senpai?”

“Pretty much for the same reasons.”

The work continued with their conversation. They warmed the tines and blades with hot water and then polished them with a soft cloth. Doing that made the cutlery sparkle, and Tomoe was honestly amazed when she saw the cutlery now looked like brand new utensils.

While Sakuta watched that scene, the bell that signalled new customers rang, and Sakuta walked quickly back out into the main area.

Waiting for him there was a group of three young girls that were somewhat familiar to him.

They all let out a gasp at his face. They were wearing a familiar uniform, and as would be expected from that fact, that was the summer uniform of the school Sakuta went to. The three girls were Tomoe’s friends, and had their collars roughly arranged. He’d seen them together before. The foremost girl had long hair and was looking somewhat fiercely at him. Immediately behind her was a girl wearing large, fashionable glasses.

“That’s why Tomoe’s working here!” Said that girl to the tall, short-haired girl behind her.

“It looks that way,” answered the foremost girl instead.

“A table for three?” Interjected Sakuta with a question.

“Yes,” answered the first girl, apparently their representative. That short conversation had let Sakuta know that this was ‘Rena-chan’. Her bearing was rather similar to a girl in Sakuta’s class... Yuuma’s girlfriend, Kamisato Saki. Her very expression showed the vivid confidence of a girl who was well aware that she was ‘the cutest in the class’.

The first sign was her skirt being short, followed by her collar being pulled down and her tie having a fashionable knot in it. She gathered the surrounding girls up, and they imitated her.

‘Cute’ was justice, and ‘unattractiveness’ and ‘being lame’ were evil. Those were the tenants upon which the queen ruled her classroom from her throne.

“Is this to your liking,” he asked, having guided them to a four-seat booth.

“It is,” answered Rena once again. As he saw her face in profile while she seated herself, Sakuta remembered Tomoe’s reason for running from Maesawa-senpai’s confession. Judging by Rena’s clear confidence, things might well develop as Tomoe had thought. Being pushed out of a group happened to students across all classrooms. Sakuta had even seen someone in a similar situation in his own classroom that day.

He had a feeling that Tomoe wasn’t actually over-thinking it.

The other two girls sat across the table from Rena after she had sat. The sequence and lack of hesitation to their actions made it seem like that was usually how they sat. Tomoe would have probably had the reserved seat next to Rena were she with them.

“Once you’re ready to order, please press the button to let me know.”

“Ah, wait.”

“You’ve decided?” Sakuta asked, opening the order terminal.

“Are you serious about Tomoe?”

“I’m sorry, we don’t serve ‘are you serious about Tomoe’ here.”

“I’m being serious here,” insisted Rena.

He had been rather polite but hadn’t shown an ounce of respect. Rather than be annoyed, the three girls had strangely expectant and friendly gazes.

“You were just rejected by Sakurajima Mai-senpai, so it looks a little doubtful,” she continued.

“What are you on about?” Sakuta asked, trying to understand what exactly the situation was.

“Tomoe’s definitely cute, but what about her do you like?” Asked the bespectacled girl.

“I think you’re misunderstanding something, probably.”

“You don’t need to hide it, we already know,” she laughed.

“Ah, there’s Tomoe,” interjected the taller girl, looking into the restaurant just

as Tomoe came out. As if feeling their eyes on her, she looked up and met their combined gazes. She seemed surprised for a moment and then fidgeted. She turned as if to head back but seemed to rethink it and trotted over.

“Y-you really came?” Asked Tomoe.

“We said we would.”

“You look cute in that.”

“Yeah, you do.”

Within a few seconds, they were acting like they were in school, bombarding her with compliments and completely excluding Sakuta. What a laid-back attitude, unable to see anyone but their own youthful, vibrant selves. He really wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“Senpai, we won’t forgive you if you lead her on,” warned Rena from where she was tugging on Tomoe’s arm, though she honestly wasn’t too threatening. Sakuta had been exposed to Mai’s intimidation on a daily basis, so it was like a soft breeze to him.

“R-Rena-chan, it’s okay,” Tomoe insisted with a somewhat vague expression, glancing at Sakuta out of the side of her eye and giving him a signal.

He’d more or less got what was going on from this conversation. Apparently, the trio were under the same impression as Maesawa-senpai, and rather than trying to solve that, Tomoe wanted to leave it in place.

“The beginning is essential with this kind of thing, you need to take the initiative,” Rena warned.

“R-right,” Tomoe said, while begging for help from Sakuta with her eyes. At that moment, a customer entered.

“Koga-san, go guide them to their table,” Sakuta instructed before then turning to address Rena and her friends, “Once you’re ready to order, call me with that button.”

He then left to take another table’s order. Tomoe clasped hands with the group and gave an apology before trotting over to the entrance and the customer standing there.

As Sakuta took the order from the family group of four, he could constantly feel Rena and her friends' gazes on him. To avoid them, he headed into the inner area, with Tomoe following a little later.

"Um, Senpai, can we-" She began, before Sakuta cut her off with:

"You finish at nine too, right?"

"Eh?"

"We can talk after work."

"But, uh, there's a lot I want to ex-"

Tomoe fluttered about, panicking.

"Until you've explained, I'll leave your friends' misunderstanding alone."

"G-got it."

Yuuma called Tomoe and she returned to work. Watching from behind, Sakuta felt that the situation was moving in irritating ways that he didn't fully understand.

3

Sakuta finished work at around twenty minutes past nine that night. There was no end to the customers today, so he hadn't been able to finish at nine as planned.

The same was true for Tomoe, it must have been tiring to have a hard day like this dropped on her for her very first day of work.

Sakuta had finished changing and was waiting in the bike parking area behind the restaurant, using his parked bike in place of a chair. He had left it here the other day during a downpour, and could thankfully take it home today.

Sakuta had decided that he'd leave if Tomoe didn't come out within the minute, but she came out within ten seconds, looking at her phone. She noticed Sakuta and came running over, still clutching her phone.

"Senpai, I actually have something I wan-" she began meekly.

“I refuse,” he interjected.

“I haven’t even asked yet!” Tomoe pouted.

“I refuse.”

“At least listen to me.”

“I refuse to listen.”

“Whyyy?”

“You pretty much just want me to leave the impression that we’re dating alone, right?” Asked Sakuta with a sigh. If this was a problem with Adolescence Syndrome then he might feel like helping, but something like what he’d just said was a separate matter.

“Senpai, can’ya read min’s?” Shouted Tomoe in surprise, her hands flying to her chest. She’d slipped into her hometown’s accent, but he wasn’t sure if she’d noticed. She probably hadn’t.

“You said yesterday about not wanting to take your friend’s man.”

“I didn’t quite say it like that.”

“Something like being confessed to by the guy your friend fancies would be ignoring the atmosphere too much?”

“Yeah...”

“And so I refuse.”

“S’whyyyy?”

“Besides, you’ve got something more important to worry about.”

For example, the reason that the twenty-seventh had stopped repeating and the twenty-eighth had come... and the reason that the twenty-seventh had repeated initially, they weren’t necessarily as Sakuta had assumed before.

“To worry about?”

“Your Adolescence Syndrome.”

“It’s today now, so that doesn’t matter,” Tomoe rejected bluntly, “now’s not the time to worry about that! I’m in trouble!”

Apparently, keeping her friendships was more important to Tomoe, her highest priority. Adolescence Syndrome didn't even register as a concern...

Trying to talk about it would just be a waste of time. With no real choice, Sakuta returned to talking about Tomoe's request.

"Regardless of the reason, lying isn't good," he scolded her, making her flinch and wince at the sound argument, "think about Maesawa-senpai's feelings too."

He honestly didn't know how serious the guy was about Tomoe from what Yuuma had said, but... Apparently, he hadn't broken up yet, and maybe he thought Tomoe would put out easily. She did look like the type to fold to pressure.

"That's fair..." she began, her shoulders dropping at Sakuta's words.

"And more than anything else, it'd cause me hassle."

"That's so irritating!"

"Besides, how long were you wanting me to leave things like this? Until the third-years graduate? That's not going to work, we'd definitely be found out, and then things would be even more annoying."

"I've already planned for that."

Sakuta could only make a confused sound in response to her unexpected reversal.

"Ah, you don't believe me," she continued.

"Whether I believe you or not doesn't matter."

"That's really irritating!"

"I get it, sorry. You probably don't even want to look at me anymore, so I'll just go."

So saying, Sakuta put his feet on the pedals and pushed off, but unfortunately, the bike soon stopped. He turned around to see Tomoe hanging on to the saddle and holding it back.

"It's only for the first term, so please!"

“Nah, I really don’t have any investment in your battle.”

“It’ll be the summer holidays after that, so we can just say we drifted apart during the holidays, right? Then go back to normal in the second term.”

“That’s premeditated fraud. You’re unexpectedly wicked, aren’t you?” He asked.

“I’m just desperate!”

“I can tell,” Sakuta said bluntly. She was putting enough force into her grip to stop Sakuta from leaving on his bike after all. Her plan was full of holes though, one of them was Sakuta himself.

“I know this is coming from *me*, but considering my reputation is trash, do you really want to seem like you’re dating me?”

“Recently, among the first-years, you’ve gone right the way around to desirable, so I think it’s fine.”

“What the hell?”

How’d he gone right back around? He wanted the details, but decided it was a lie.

“Screaming your love at the centre of the sports field is nothing like normal.”

“That’s just something for people to laugh at.”

Though Sakuta claimed that, Rena and the others acted surprisingly normally with him, no one in his own classroom talked to him, but *they* had.

The rumour that he had sent a classmate to the hospital during middle school had put Sakuta in a delicate position about a year prior. It probably wouldn’t have become so set within the minds of the first years like Tomoe, who hadn’t experienced that change in the school’s atmosphere, it would have just ended up with something like ‘the upper years are saying...’

On top of that, the first term was nearly over, and the first-years themselves were starting to form their own culture, apparently a slightly different culture than the rest of the school.

“I kind of look up to that kind of thing,” admitted Tomoe.

“I wouldn’t do it for you, Koga.”

“It’d really bother me, so good!”

Whatever else happened, Sakuta would never understand how women thought.

“Ah, that’s right, *dating* might be a little fast,” she continued, “so going with the step before might work.”

“So you’re just ignoring everything I say.”

“You’d be more than my schoolmate, less than my boyfriend I guess?”

“That’s a fine line, that’d be harder than dating. Are you okay with it?”

“Okay with what?”

“With things like dating,” he said, staring fixedly at Tomoe. She was wearing the familiar school uniform, a white blouse, short skirt, blue socks and loafers. Overall it gave her a cohesive, small and compact impression. “Well, I guess you’ve dated before.”

High school girls nowadays were quick with that.

“Y-yeah,” she agreed, stammering and looking away, “only for a while though...”

“Hmmm.”

“W-what?”

“I was just thinking you seem grown up.”

“That’s kinda creepy. Okay? You’ll act like you like me then?”

She seemed to be proceeding under the assumption that he’d agree, though Sakuta had no memory of doing so.

“Do you realise what you’re actually planning?”

Lying to just Maesawa-senpai might be fine. But to avoid that being discovered, they would need to deceive others as well. Tomoe had already lied to her friends, and the scope would gradually increase.

Gossip about who was dating who would spread without real help, whether it

was a lie or not. Being linked with someone infamous like Sakuta would just exacerbate that. So to deceive Maesawa-senpai, the two would have to lie to the entire school.

“We’d be lying to about a thousand students,” he warned her. It was by no means a small number.

“I already know that,” she insisted, not showing a sign of dismay or surprise.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Should he treat that as having guts, or just purity being twisted? He couldn’t decide.

“Anyway, please!” She clapped her hands together in front of her and bowed her head.

“Say... how does helping you help *me*?”

He could think of many disadvantages, particularly with respect to Mai. It would just push their dating further away, when ordinarily they should have already been boyfriend and girlfriend. They should have been being lovey-dovey and flirting...

“If you help, I’ll do any one thing you ask.”

“I don’t really have anything I want you to do,” replied Sakuta immediately.

“E-even though I’ll do *anything*?”

She looked up at him with no confidence. She really did seem like she was scamming him.

“A teenage girl shouldn’t be saying they’ll do *anything* so easily.” It was actually somewhat arousing.

“B-but at this rate, I won’t have a place in my class,” she said, slumping as she looked seriously at her own hands, “I don’t want to be alone at break, eat my lunch alone, or go to the toilet alone.”

“Go to the toilet on your own,” he scolded.

They certainly didn’t go into the cubicles together. But Sakuta didn’t know

that, so as far as he was concerned, maybe they did. Girls were terrifying.

“I think you already know so I’ll admit it, but I lived in Fukuoka during middle school, and I don’t have anyone but my friends at school here... Rena-chan, Hinako-chan, and Aya-chan.”

“The three from earlier?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, casting her eyes down.

“Being alone is pretty good. You don’t need to be conscious of people around you, and it’s not as lonely as you’d think.”

In Sakuta’s case, that was because he had Yuuma and Rio, and then as of recently, Mai as well.

“It’s not because I’d be lonely.”

“Huh? Why then?”

“It’d be... embarrassing,” Tomoe let out in a small voice.

Sakuta felt something slide into his chest.

“I don’t want everyone to think ‘she’s always alone’ or anything,” she continued.

“I get it.”

He could oddly agree. He took his feet from the pedals and returned them to the floor.

It wasn’t the isolation she was scared of. It was how she would be seen by everyone when she was excluded. She didn’t want rumours spread about her, and the thought that people might be mocking her somewhere was the worst of all.

It was that shame that caused deeper wounds than the isolation on an immature heart. The feelings of being pathetic, of being gradually seen as less and less by people... It robbed you of your confidence, and closed off your heart.

Sakuta wordlessly placed his hand on Tomoe’s downcast head.

“Senpai?” She asked, looking up in puzzlement.

Kaede had said the same thing when she was bullied.

“It’s... embarrassing to go to school.”

She didn’t want everyone to watch her being bullied, and she stopped leaving the house, afraid of others’ gazes.

An image of Kaede from then seemed to overlay Tomoe to Sakuta.

A reason for exclusion could be the most trivial thing, you never knew if something would cause it. A single moment could create that kind of atmosphere would instantly spread through the surroundings, and then it would be too late. Treating the disease was difficult.

Particularly because girls had a different group culture than boys. Whatever they seemed to be like on the surface, it was impossible to see the relationships within from the outside. If someone fell out with their group, they were unlikely to be able to move to another easily.

“You’re in the main group, right?”

“Eh?”

“The group of the cutest girls in the class.”

“It’s difficult to agree with that,” she answered while pouting, indirectly confirming it.

Making the main group’s leader hate her certainly would cause issues. No one would go against the girl with the most influence in the class. They couldn’t. Hurting her feelings would have them exiled to the island of loners. So they agreed unconditionally. If she said something was cute, it was cute, if she said she hated it, so did they.

And in this case, it was Kashiba Rena in that position, and Maesawa-senpai, who she liked, was after Tomoe. He could understand why she was worried now.

“Okay,” he said firmly.

“Eh?”

“I said okay, I’ll lie to all thousand-odd students at school.”

“Really?”

“I have a condition though.”

“M-my body?” She stuttered, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Who’d be interested in your underdeveloped body? How rude.”

“You’re the one being rude! For sure!”

“Anyway, listen,” he insisted.

“R-right.”

Tomoe nodded with a nervous expression, gulping.

Sakuta let out a single sigh before speaking solemnly:

“Cheer your heart out for the Japanese team in the third group league match.”

Tomoe’s only reply was a noise of utter confusion.

“If they lose, then it’ll be as if this never happened.”

“I don’t get what you mean! What are you on about?”

“Alright, that’s it,” Sakuta said, ignoring her pleas for an explanation and putting his feet on the pedals again.

“Ah, wait.”

“That’s all I have to say.”

“I’ll support them! I still have a request...” he turned around at this point to see her fidgeting with her fingers, “A-about tomorrow.”

“What about it?”

“You have work until two, right?”

“I do.”

“O-once your shift is over... g-g-g-”

“Give you a whack on the forehead, right.”

“No!” She yelled, covering her forehead.

A couple crossing the road ahead chuckled to each other, the woman saying: "I guess it's a lover's quarrel."

"G-go on a date with me," Tomoe finished, her face having grown redder from the couple's laughter.

After they had finished speaking, Sakuta saw Tomoe to her neighbourhood before riding slowly off towards his own home. They lived surprisingly close together.

Summer was approaching as June ended, and riding against the breeze in that heat and humidity was rather pleasant. White clouds crossed the dark sky as Sakuta looked up at the stars. Even Sakuta knew about the Summer Triangle. Vega from the Lyra constellation, and Altair from the Aquila constellation, otherwise known as Orihime and Hikoboshi, the deities that could meet on Tanabata.

After a while, he remembered something else, the star Deneb in the Cygnus constellation. Sakuta's first love, the high school student Makinohara Shouko was the one that had told him about it when they met in his third year of middle school.

He didn't know where she was now, or what she was doing. He didn't have her contact information, and he had never met her again.

He couldn't even remember her face properly as his memories grew vague. Instead, it was Mai's unhappy expression that came to mind.

"Now, what to do," he said to himself.

"G-go on a date with me."

And in response, Sakuta had just asked 'why?'.

"Rena-chan asked if we were going on a date, and it's like that..."

"Like what?"

"Like she's saying to go on a date at the weekend."

"So she's telling you to get carried away?"

"Senpai, you're scaring me!"

"It really was a whack you wanted."

Tomoe quickly hid her forehead again.

"Why not just say 'maaan, I had loads of fun on the weekend~'?" He asked.

"I want to take pictures just in case."

"...You're surprisingly thorough."

It wasn't that he didn't understand, saying that she'd had a date over the weekend would have the others fawning over her for pictures. And then it would seem strange that she hadn't taken a single one, what with the prevalence of smartphones and just phones with cameras in general. Such an annoyance...

And so, he had no choice but to go on a date with Tomoe tomorrow.

Things were progressing rather strangely.

How would he tell Mai what was happening? On top of all of this, she had witnessed him holding Tomoe yesterday and so was in a foul mood. Bringing Tomoe up even more in that situation would definitely make her lose the restraint of her anger at him.

That thought was...

"Damn, that seems like it'd be really fun."

He didn't have a single bad thought when imagining the scene. With a smirk firmly on his face, Sakuta pedalled his bike the rest of the way home.

4

Sakuta had soaked for a good while in the bath to relax after work before putting a pair of underwear on and going out into the living room, where Kaede was sitting. She was watching the TV, a rarity for her, where a program on animals... no, a documentary on the zookeepers at some zoo, was playing. They were worrying over how to care for the newly born baby panda each day.

Kaede was holding Nasuno to her chest, closely watching the panda take tottering steps.

Watching her from the corner of his eye, Sakuta took out a sports drink from the fridge and poured it into a glass before draining it dry. The cold drink was soothing on his warm body, and it was just as he was opening the fridge for another that Kaede called out.

“O-Onii-chan, look!”

She was pointing at the screen, frantically trying to draw his attention.

“Someone you know on there?”

“There is!”

“Huh?”

Sakuta had said it as a joke, but she had confirmed it. Wondering what was happening, he looked around the fridge and watched the advert on the TV.

...It certainly was someone they knew.

It was an advert for a sports drink. The blue-labelled one that Sakuta had in his hand at that very moment in fact.

“Want a sip? Fufu, it’s not for *you*.” Said Mai on the screen, kicking white sand at the screen and running away from the camera with a mischievous giggle.

“I-is that the girl you brought over?”

“It is.”

It was without a doubt Mai. The famous actress, Sakurajima Mai. She hadn’t said a word to Sakuta about the advert though.

The short clip was soon over and the doorbell rang at the same moment.

“Who is it at this hour...?” He grumbled to himself. The clock was already nearing ten PM. With the question in mind, he pressed the button on the intercom and answered: “Yes?”

“It’s me.” Came the short reply, in the same voice that had just been coming from the TV.

Three minutes later, Sakuta was sitting on his bedroom floor before Mai, who was sat on the bed opposite with her legs folded.

“Why haven’t you come to give your excuses?”

“I’m grateful for the chance to explain, and I do apologise, but I couldn’t request a meeting.”

It was the truth, Sakuta had gone to class 3–1’s classroom after both break and homeroom, but she hadn’t been there.

“Are you trying to say it’s my fault?”

“I didn’t put enough effort in.”

“Then don’t you have something to say?”

“Umm, Mai-san, you seem kind of lively today?”

He had noticed when he opened the door for her, she seemed a little different than normal. She had makeup on, and her hair seemed like it had been styled by a pro. Her hair all swept in, completing her cute impression that was just slightly different from her usual trends.

“There was a shoot for a fashion magazine, it wasn’t for you.”

So that’s why she wasn’t at school, he thought.

“You’re seriously cute,” he said.

“I know.”

“I love you.”

“I’ll step on you if you mess around.”

Mai lifted her black-tight-clad leg and actually placed it on Sakuta’s lap where he could feel Mai’s body heat and the smooth sensation of the tights.

This was a luxurious reward, he thought as he felt his face heat.

“Don’t get happy about it,” she scolded as she retracted her leg. What a waste.

“Oh yeah, I saw your advert.”

“I see,” she replied with a bored tone as she looked out of the window.

“I’d not heard anything about it.”

"I knew what time it was supposed to air, so I was going to surprise you with it just before. And yet *someone* was playing around with a first-year. What do you have to say?"

"I'm really sorry."

"Have you reflected on it?"

"I have."

"Have you now?"

"I have! But, it's really hard to say in this situation."

"What is?"

"I had a discussion with that first year."

Sakuta would need to have a fairly good relationship with Tomoe for the first term. Trying to fight a two-front-war by not telling Mai would be far too reckless. He'd definitely be found out so it was best to tell her quickly.

But even so, telling Mai when she was already in a bad mood was difficult.

"Sakuta."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Why don't you get dressed first?"

Sakuta was still in just his underwear.

Now wearing a pair of trousers and a shirt, Sakuta once more knelt across from Mai and explained about Tomoe to her while trying to judge her reactions. He explained why she was in the room yesterday, why he had ended up holding her, the confession from Maesawa Yousuke, and why Tomoe was in a bad situation. Then, without hiding anything, he explained that she happened to start working with him and that she had asked him to be 'more than her schoolmate, but less than her boyfriend'.

However, he didn't say a word about Adolescence Syndrome... that it had been the third time that the twenty-seventh had repeated, or that Mai had agreed to date him.

He didn't want to make her worry while her return to show-business was

going so well, and telling her that she *had* agreed to date him felt like breaking the rules.

“Hmmm, it’s tough being a girl,” Mai gave her opinion bluntly when she had finished listening. She should have counted as a girl herself, but seemed not to realise. “I get the situation.”

She even seemed to have taken everything relatively well, wasn’t she going to remonstrate him?

“Is that it?” He asked.

“If I scolded you, you’d probably enjoy it,” she said, completely seeing through him, “for you, *not* punishing you would be more of a punishment.”

“Tease me more.”

“No way.”

“Ehhh.”

“Don’t act spoilt.” Maybe he should treat this as a good thing. No, not making an issue of it might not end well. “But I’m not fully sold.”

“How so?”

“You hate lies like pretending to be lovers, don’t you, Sakuta?”

“We’re not pretending to be lovers, we’re pretending to be more than schoolmates but less than lovers.”

“It’s all the same.”

“Well, I don’t think there’s anyone that *likes* those kind of lies.”

“That’s why I’m not sold, you’re hiding something.” Mai leaned forwards and glared at him.

“I’ve actually been looking at your legs and getting excited.”

“I-I know that,” she said, recrossing her legs and tugging on the hem of her skirt, “d-don’t look so closely~”

“It’s no big deal.”

“Hurry up and confess.” Mai glared at him, her eyes serious and steady.

“Koga... she said the same thing as Kaede.”

“What?”

“She’d lose her place in the group and in her class if her friend found out that Maesawa-senpai had confessed to her... and said that she didn’t want that *embarrassment*.”

Sakuta slowly put his thoughts into words.

“*Embarrassing*.” If Tomoe hadn’t used that word, Sakuta would have never gone along with her proposal.

“With Kaede, it went as badly as it could...”

The memories of those times went through his mind.

She refused to go to school, shut herself up in her room and on top of all that, was being tormented by her Adolescence Syndrome, with cuts and bruises all over her body.

His mother had been unable to accept that reality and had gone into hospital with a mental illness. That was why they lived separately now.

The impetus was the trifling thing of Kaede not replying to a message after reading it.

Like a tear in a seam, that had grown ridiculously and even two years later, it still affected their lives. Such a small thing could affect someone this much, so...

“I wanted to do something about it this time.”

He didn’t think it was necessarily the correct decision himself. It might just be trying to atone for doing nothing in the past, or using Tomoe to deal with his feelings from that. The worries from back then were still dwelling in his chest.

“Sakuta.”

“What is it?”

“That’s annoying.”

“I was being serious though?”

“If you bring up your sister like that, I can’t complain.”

No, he thought, *this is definitely complaining, just from how dissatisfied you look.*

"I think you already know," she continued, "but..."

"But what?"

"Make sure you take responsibility for that lie."

"It'll never be found out, I'll take it to my grave," he vowed.

"As long as you understand that staying quiet is hard."

"Maesawa-senpai's got a girlfriend but he's still making a pass at Tomoe, and he's going to break up with his girlfriend now because so won't put out... man people that can say something like that with a straight face have it easy."

"Men are the worst," Mai said, looking at Sakuta scornfully.

"You're the only girl for me, Mai-san."

"Acting like more than a schoolmate but less than a boyfriend is going to end up with real love."

"You've got no faith."

"I'm warning you now, I'll only wait until the end of the term."

"So that means that when term's over, you'll go out with me?"

"That..." she looked away, "That depends on how I feel then."

"Why do you look unhappy?"

"Because I've been trying for so long for a reward from you."

"That's rather cheeky seeing as you decided to hold someone else," Mai said, before opening her mouth when she remembered something, "Do you have work tomorrow?"

"I do."

"Until when?"

"Until two."

"Hmmm," Mai rather cheerfully swung her legs back and forth, looking rather

expectantly at him, "I'm free tomorrow afternoon."

Apparently, she was trying to make him invite her on a date.

"The Kamakura hydrangeas are still blooming you know?"

She'd even chosen a place, and all that expectation made his next words even harder.

"Um," Sakuta hesitantly opened his mouth. When Mai saw this, she seemed to infer something and her expression returned to boredom.

"Oh, have a date with that first-year do you?"

"Not really a date, but something like it I guess."

Silence stretched on for a moment.

"Mai-san?"

She then let out an unmotivated sigh.

"Forget it."

Sakuta thought that she was going to complain more, but nothing more was forthcoming for several moments.

"You're not going to say something like 'do you like her more than me' or anything?"

"Why do I have to be jealous?"

"Ehh."

"I already know you've completely fallen to me."

"Well, that's true."

"I doubt I'd lose to that first-year."

"Woah, such confidence."

That was Sakurajima Mai, it was only natural for her.

"And so I'll let it pass this time."

"Thank you..."

"But, I know..." Mai thought for a while and then smiled teasingly two

seconds later, “Just allowing it would be no good for the future, so do something to show some good faith.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Think of it yourself.”

“In which case.”

Sakuta leaned forwards and started to approach Mai on all fours.

“W-what are you doing?” Mai panicked, leaning back, but her back soon hit the wall. Sakuta showed no sign of concern and continued forwards, “Stay away!” Mai yelled, kicking him right in the face.

Sakuta rolled back from the bed, his nose crushed.

“What were you trying to do?” She demanded.

“I was showing good faith.”

“That was your lust.”

“Ah, maybe.”

“There’s an order to things,” she stressed, “we’re not even dating yet.”

“Then let’s take this chance to start.”

“No.”

“That’s depressiing.”

“And whose fault is that?” She asked, glaring coldly at him.

“It’s completely my fault.”

“Reflect on that then.”

Sakuta returned to his knees for a third time.

“As far as dates go, are you free next Sunday?”

“I’m in Kagoshima for the next week, filming.”

“Oh yeah.”

Mai straightened herself and then looked quizzically at him.

“You don’t seem too surprised?”

That was because he’d already heard about it before, but that was on the *first* twenty-seventh of June he had experienced.

“I just thought that considering it’s you, you’d already have managed to get a role already.”

“I have, but...” Something seemed to catch Mai’s attention, and the doubt didn’t leave her eyes.

“Man, Kagoshima, that’s nice.”

“I’m not going there to play.”

Mai re-seated herself on the edge of the bed, her legs brushing against a back on the floor and knocking it over. It was a bag she herself had brought. She picked it up and held it out to Sakuta with a “Here”.

“Hm?”

“Take it.”

He did so, inside was a cute dress, a girl’s of course...

“Is this to use to remember you while you’re in Kagoshima?”

“Give it to your sister,” she said, appalled.

“Huh?”

He didn’t really understand what she meant.

“I said I had a fashion shoot earlier, right? They gave me the clothes.” In other words, Mai had taken this off, when he thought that, he got the feeling he could smell a pleasant scent from it, “it’s more feminine than what I wear.”

Spreading it out, he saw that the hem and cuffs both had frills on them.

“So you want me to give it to Kaede?”

“She’s only a little shorter than me, so it should fit.”

“That’s not what I mean...”

He just couldn’t get why she had suddenly given him a present for Kaede.

"It's a bit of a roundabout way of saying to give some attention to what your sister wears."

"That was pretty straightforward though?"

"If she likes her panda pyjamas that's fine... but she's fifteen this year, right?"

"Yeah."

"If she has some fashionable clothes, she might want to go out a little."

"Ah..."

Those words settled everything for him. Mai had worried for Kaede, and she had thought that she might not spend the entirety of the rest of her life in the house. It wasn't sympathy, or saying something like 'poor thing'... It was actually trying to help.

He couldn't help but stare at her.

"W-what are you staring for?" She asked

"I'm just happy you're thinking about Kaede."

"Of course I'd do that," said Mai as if it was nothing. Though she was childish when teasing Sakuta, it bothered him when she sometimes acted so much like an adult like this. He couldn't contain his feelings, and it always made him feel like he'd never measure up.

"I'll call her in," he said, standing quickly.

"Will that be okay?"

"As long as you don't make a scary face."

"I won't," she glared at Sakuta with a frown.

"That's the face I mean."

"What face would that be?" She asked, smiling kindly as her irritation vanished.

The speed of the change was somewhat scary itself but if he said that, she really would get angry.

He flung the door open, but it suddenly stopped with a think after opening

about five centimetres.

Kaede groaned from behind the door. Slowly, he tried again, and it opened this time to reveal Kaede crouching behind it, holding her forehead.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

Kaede looked up and met his eyes. And with a clear sense of being caught, her mouth dropped open.

“It’s not what you think,” she said, even though Sakuta hadn’t suggested anything yet, “I wasn’t playing ninja.”

“Well, I just thought you were eavesdropping...” apparently she was playing on a higher level. It was probably the influence of the historical novels she had been reading until the last month, “Well, good timing either way.”

“What’s good timing?” She asked, following Sakuta into his room in puzzlement. She soon noticed Mai and hid behind Sakuta’s back.

“Good evening,” Mai greeted, and Kaede stuck her head out.

“G-good evening.” She replied in a faint, but still audible to Mai, voice.

“Kaede, this is from Mai-san.”

Sakuta handed the frilly dress back to where she was clinging to his back. She took it in confusion and finally moved away from him.

“What’s this?” She asked while spreading the dress out. Her gaze was soon fixed on it once she had, apparently, she was interested, “It’s so cute.”

“Do you want to try it on?” Asked Mai, causing Kaede to look at Sakuta as if for his decision. He gave a slow nod and Kaede dashed off as if she couldn’t wait.

It was a reaction he’d never seen from her before. Girls really did understand each other best.

After several minutes waiting, she returned and stuck her head shyly through the door.

“Onii-chan, promise not to laugh.”

“I’ll laugh if it’s funny.”

Kaede pulled her head back.

“It’s okay, it’ll definitely suit you,” Mai encouraged, and Kaede timidly stepped into the room.

“W-what do you think?”

The dress had a summery white base and fell to her knees, fitting her slim body well.

“Yup, it’s cute,” Mai affirmed.

“It’s the first time I’ve worn something like this, so it’s embarrassing.”

Kaede’s face was bright red and she seemed to enjoy seeing herself in the glass of the window. She turned to the left and right, and then all the way around.

“What do you think, Onii-chan?”

“It’s not funny at all.”

“Can’t you just honestly call her cute?” Mai teased him.

He had to change the topic.

“Make sure you thank Mai-san,” he told Kaede.

When she and Mai met each other’s eyes, Kaede hid behind him again, but...

“T-thank you,” she said politely.

“You’re welcome,” Mai replied.

“U-um...”

Kaede glanced at Mai’s face.

“What is it?”

“Can I call you Mai-san too?”

“You can. I’ll call you Kaede-chan as well.”

“R-right.”

“And, um...”

“Hmm?”

“Mai-san, what kind of relationship do you have with Onii-chan?”

“Let’s see...” she seemed to think, before glancing at Sakuta, obviously plotting something, “I suppose he’s more than my schoolmate, but less than my boyfriend,” she said cynically.

“W-will he become your boyfriend?”

“That depends on Sakuta. Apparently, there’s another girl he gets on well with.”

“I-is that true, Onii-chan?”

“Mai-san, don’t tell lies please.”

Just as he thought that he’d have to explain to Kaede, the clock chimed as it reached eleven PM.

“It’s late, I’m going home,” Mai said as she stood from the bed, “if I stay any longer, I think Sakuta will do something to me.”

“W-what would you do?” Kaede asked, peering at Sakuta’s face.

“Something sexual of course,” he said truthfully as he left the room with Mai and put his shoes on in the hall, “I’ll walk you downstairs.”

“You will? Well, I’ll let you. I’ll see you again, Kaede-chan.”

“R-right.”

She was more scared as the distance between them decreased again, but she poked her head from Sakuta’s room and gave a small wave.

Sakuta and Mai left and walked into the lift in silence.

The doors closed and the lift started to move, with that floating sensation starting at their feet.

“Thank you for today,” Sakuta spoke.

“What are you being so formal for?” She asked in return.

“It’s been a long time since Kaede has spoken so much to anyone but me, so I’m just happy.”

“I can’t mess with you when you’re so honest.”

While she spoke, the lift reached the ground floor and opened. They stepped out of the auto-locking glass doors and the characteristic summer air draped itself over their skin.

“It’s already summer,” said Mai.

Even though the sun had set, the temperature hadn’t dropped at all, and it was the beginning of sleepless nights from the heat.

“Do you hate the summer, Mai-san?”

“Taking care I don’t burn is annoying,” she said, her tone saying that she was used to it.

“You’re still wearing tights though.”

“Well, I’ve got modelling jobs... What about you?”

“Hm?”

“Do you like summer?”

“If I can’t enjoy your bare legs, then I’ll pass.”

It was hot, it was humid, and he’d have to show his scars during swimming, none of that was a good thing. While they chatted aimlessly, they reached their destination, the building right in front of them.

“I hope the pretence doesn’t become the reality,” Mai murmured after a pause in the conversation.

“What?”

“With that first-year.”

“I already said that you’re the only girl for me, didn’t I?”

Mai gave him a sidelong glance as if she wanted to say something.

“If you don’t understand, that’s fine,” was what she eventually settled with before entering the building.

“Mai-san?”

Mai opened the auto-locking doors and turned back to him.

“Good night,” she said, raising her hand slightly.

The door closed and she disappeared inside. Sakuta watched her go before turning on his heel and returning back to where Kaede was waiting for him.

He had work tomorrow from the morning until a little after noon, so he should go to sleep early. He should, but with the day close to ending, something was bothering Sakuta.

“I wonder if tomorrow will come...” he murmured in the lift.

No one gave him an answer.

Chapter 3 — False Lovers Begin

1

The twenty-ninth did indeed arrive in the end, and its morning found Kaede waking Sakuta up.

“Morning, Kaede,” he said whilst stretching an arm out for the digital alarm clock at the side of his bed. His half-closed eyes saw the right date of Sunday the twenty-ninth displayed on the screen.

Should he be thankful for that, he wondered. He hadn’t repeated the day again, but not knowing the cause or reason for it in the first place made it hard to relax about it.

If he wasn’t going to wake up to a day for the second time again, he really wished someone would tell him that. If the possibility was still there, he’d rather someone told him that as well.

Not knowing left an uneasiness in his heart.

“I wonder if I’ll figure it out, hanging around Koga,” he murmured to himself as he watched Kaede herd Nasuno out of his room. Part of the reason he had accepted Tomoe’s absurd suggestion was to find out the truth behind this instance of Adolescence Syndrome. The only way to move his disquiet aside was, in the end, to do something about it himself.

Besides, there was a value in understanding many different types of Adolescence Syndrome. He might even find something that would lead to solving the case that still plagued Kaede to this day.

The wounds no longer covered her body, but that was simply because she was away from the internet, and he believed that if she were to experience people’s ill-will on the internet again, those wounds would once more appear.

With all of that said, she couldn’t just live her life secluded away from everyone, he wouldn’t allow such absurdity.

“Anyway, not knowing what day it is until I get up and check really doesn’t let

me calm down...”

If the plans hadn't been settled yesterday, perhaps it still would have been yesterday.

With that restlessness still present, Sakuta started his mid-morning shift, tending attentively to the restaurant floor.

“If tomorrow is today again, will I have worked for nothing...”

Just the repetition wouldn't help him support himself.

Once his shift was over, Sakuta prayed to the god of self-support that tomorrow would come.

At just past two, Sakuta clocked out, left the restaurant and went to the Fujisawa Enoden station, using his season ticket to pass the gates.

He bought himself a bottle of water from a vending machine and then sat on a bench to wait for Tomoe for their date.

Sakuta used the platform often to commute into school, there were tourist attractions signposted, and adverts with famous products on the walls. The early-afternoon of a day off lent a rather different mood to the people around. There were more tourists than locals. There was a group of older women that seemed to be heading to Kamakura, a family that had come to see the beach, and a young couple that seemed to be on a date to Enoshima. Incidentally, this was the same plan that Sakuta and Tomoe would be following.

Time passed slowly on the platform before he heard the patter of feet approaching.

“S-sorry to keep you waiting!”

Sakuta raised his face and saw Tomoe standing shyly to the side.

She was wearing a pair of short denim shorts, with a sleeveless blouse that had frills on the collar and arm-holes. She was wearing easy to move in trainers on her feet, and was holding a striped blue and white tote-bag as if to hide her bared legs.

While she still had a girlishness and softness about her, she had an invigorating impression perfect for a beach date as well.

She stood in front of Sakuta as he remained silent, her gaze wandering and her worry plainly visible on her face.



“You’re flushed,” he pointed out.

“It’s because I was rushing.”

“I guess that works.”

“I wouldn’t worry about a date like that,” Tomoe added defensively.

“You’re five minutes late anyway, Koga.”

They’d agreed when they left work that they would meet here at half-past two. It was thirty-five minutes past when Tomoe arrived, and steadily approaching forty.

“I couldn’t help it, I had to get ready.”

“Get ready, huh?”

Sakuta surveyed her closely, he certainly could see how her look was something she’d had to ‘get ready’. She had a modern, fashionable aura about her without being gaudy, and fitting in with her surroundings.

“W-what?”

“Well, you’re cute.”

“D-don’t call me cute.”

“I’ve got to, you *are* cute.”

“Don’t keep saying it!”

“You lose points for not wearing a mini-skirt, but your legs are bare so I’ll forgive you.”

“You’re not allowed to just look at my legs either,” she protested, crouching and wrapping her arms around those bare legs of hers to hide them, “they’re fat anyway.”

Her teary eyes as she looked up at him made him want to tease her more, and the thing which drew his eyes the most at that point was her round backside covered by her shorts.

“Don’t say anything about my backside either,” she forestalled him, having

noticed his gaze. That was surprisingly sharp of her.

“Why?”

“It’s big,” she said sulkily.

“They’re good child-bearing hips.”

“D-don’t give me strange compliments like that!” Tomoe gave her biggest reaction of the day. “I can’t believe you!”

She had gone red to her ears and was being careful that no one around could hear them.

“Where did you buy those clothes?”

“Eh? Just a normal sto-”

“Which one?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I thought I’d buy my sister some clothes once I got my wages,” Mai had told him to take more of an interest in Kaede’s clothes, and Tomoe was only a year older than her so she should be useful as a reference.

“You have a sister, Senpai? How old is she?” Asked Tomoe, sitting next to him.

“A year younger than you. She’s bigger though.”

“I wasn’t asking about her chest.”

“And I wasn’t talking about her chest, I was talking about her height.”

“I-I knew that... Ah, yeah, what’s your ID?”

Tomoe was suddenly very serious and she fished her phone from her bag.

“Huh?”

“We should have been able to contact each other if we were going to be late, tell me your ID?” She pouted at him.

“Are you trying to say it’s my fault?”

“Well, it was my fault I’m late... sorry,” she gave a proper apology this time.

“Well, I’m not going to make an issue out of five minutes.”

“You already did! Anyway, your ID?”

Tomoe pointed the screen at him, waiting for his details.

“I don’t have one.”

“Eh?”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t use the app!?” She yelled out, in apparent confusion that people like that still existed.

It was an issue that she was *that* surprised though.

“I don’t use a smartphone, or a normal phone for that matter.”

“Huh?” Tomoe said, her eyes wide, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That I don’t have one,” Sakuta said truthfully, lifting his hands. He had thrown it in the sea. It was the day that he had been accepted into Minegahara High School and he had decided that he would throw it into the sea to keep Kaede away from the internet.

“I don’t get it at all.”

“Please do.”

“But how do you *live*!?”

“Do people die without smartphones?”

“They do!” She proclaimed, “If anything, dying...”

Tomoe was looking at Sakuta like he was a zombie, but it was her face that had paled.

“Ah, the train’s here,” said Sakuta, ignoring Tomoe as she carried on, and following the family onto the train.

“Ah, wait!” Tomoe panicked, rushing after him.

The chime sounded to indicate the train’s departure and the doors slid shut.

The train set off and rocked Sakuta and Tomoe to the left and right where they were sitting next to each other. For a while, Tomoe kept muttering ‘unbelievable’, but she suddenly quieted around when they reached the next

stop.

When the train departed again, Sakuta's right shoulder had a weight fall on it. Tomoe was leaning against him, and when he looked she had her mouth slightly open as she dozed.

"Oi," he said, flicking her lightly on the forehead.

"Ow!"

Tomoe covered her forehead with her hands and looked reproachfully up at him.

"Do you normally just fall asleep like that?"

"I didn't get much sleep."

"Excited for the date?"

"I stayed up until two messaging everyone... Then I was watching funny animal videos and it was morning, then I had to get re..." Tomoe trailed off into a large yawn, covering her mouth with both hands. She quickly wiped the slight tears from her eyes to avoid ruining her makeup, and took a mirror from her back to check.

"Koga, wasn't it your first day at work yesterday?"

"Yeah."

"Weren't you tired?"

Doing new things generally made people more tired than usual.

"I was exhausted."

"Then you should have gone tight to sleep."

"I couldn't be the only one sleeping," she protested.

"But staying up to watch funny videos is fine."

"Everyone said they'd watched them, and I couldn't join in. Besides, Rena-chan recommended them, you know?"

"Rena-chan again, huh..."

Social lives are tough, he thought.

“Oh yeah, gotta comment.”

Tomoe took her phone out before quickly opening a free messaging app and typing out a message about how good the videos were with deft movements.

A reply soon arrived, and when Sakuta took a glance, it said ‘I recommend this one too,’ so Tomoe wouldn’t be getting much sleep tonight either it seemed.

Or so he thought, but Tomoe started watching it then and there. The small LCD screen displayed a clumsy panda falling over backwards, its legs forming a perfect V in the air.

The train arrived before the video had finished.

“Come on, it’s our stop,” said Sakuta, pulling Tomoe by the arm onto the platform as she kept watching.

Enoshima Station was one of the bigger stations that the Enoden stopped at. You could switch to the Shonan Monorail and a short walk would take you to a station building modelled on the Palace of the Dragon King, Katase Station on the Odakyu-Enoshima line. Incidentally, Enoshima Station wasn’t actually on the island called Enoshima, it was just nearby.

Sakuta and Tomoe left the station and headed south, towards the sea. The scent of the breeze evoked thoughts of summer as it blew towards them.

The road was brick-paved and called Subana Street. There were fashionable cafes, and the holiday meant there were a lot of pedestrians, with many couples in particular.

“So many couples,” said Tomoe.

“Well, it’s Sunday.”

“Do we look like one too?”

“I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Well...”

Sakuta judged the distance between the two of them, it was a little more than a metre by his reckoning. It was nearly the width of a lane in the road, so you

could call them practically unrelated people and people had been passing between them with no concern at all. If they'd been seen as a couple, people wouldn't have done so. Tomoe seemed to realise the meaning of his gaze and drew closer. A little more than a metre shortened to a little less than a metre.

"Is this better?" She asked.

"It's more like that," Sakuta replied, indicating a university student and his girlfriend who were close enough they kept bumping shoulders. Finally, Tomoe closed in to Sakuta's side.

"Then there's stuff like that," he continued, looking at a couple about the same age as them who were perusing a menu outside a cafe. The girl was holding two fingers on the boy's hand, his little finger and ring finger. "That should be nothing for you, seeing as you've dated before, riiight?"

"O-of course."

Ever so slowly, Tomoe stretched out her hand. Her hand didn't touch Sakuta's but instead grabbed hold of something else, the end of his belt, hanging by his waist.

She certainly had a wholesome relationship with her last boyfriend. If he actually existed that is...

Tomoe was looking down in embarrassment as if this was taking her utmost effort. With her small stature as she did so, it was strangely cute overall. However, there was one problem.

"I feel like I've been turned into a dog."

That, that was the problem.

"Ah, we've got a dog."

"We've got a cat. Anyway, you don't have to force yourself to act like a couple."

It might be different in school, but fooling people strangers would be no help.

"That... might not be..." Tomoe started inarticulately, turning her face away, "Umm... Senpai, there's something I wanted to tell you."

The brick paving ran out, and the sea came into view in front of them. Floating on the waves was the island they were heading towards, Enoshima. It was a tied island jutting out into the bay of Sagami, which drew an arc like a drawn bow. To the west, Odawara and Hakone could be seen, and if the weather was good, Mount Fuji was also visible, but on a day like today with clouds in the sky, the general shape was all they could make out.

“Would that be about the three sneaking after us?”

Since they had arrived at Enoshima Station, Sakuta had happened to feel the fact he was being watched. He had checked behind them while pretending to look at Tomoe and seen Rena and their other two friends, Hinako and Aya.

“You noticed then?”

“Well, you were being suspicious too.”

“W-was I?”

They wouldn’t just be able to take photos and say the date went fine. If Rena and the others were constantly watching them, they’d have no choice but to properly carry out their act of being ‘more than schoolmates, less than boyfriend and girlfriend’.

“Rena-chan said she’d be judging you...”

“She’s been suspicious since yesterday.”

She wasn’t suspicious about whether they were lying, it was about Sakuta’s sensitivity and humanity. She couldn’t believe that he had so easily moved on to Tomoe after confessing to Mai in front of the whole school a month prior. She was probably worrying about Tomoe being with someone like that.

“Isn’t friendship just amazing?”

“I get the feeling you don’t mean that in a good way.”

That friendship making the situation more complex made him want to be sarcastic. Honestly, knowing he was being watched made playing around less pleasant. Surely it was a senior’s duty to show the harshness of life to juniors that were making light of keeping a secret.

“Koga, change of plans,” he said, grabbing Tomoe’s arm as she continued

straight on, Sakuta took a right onto route 134, turning his back on Shichirigahama and crossing a bridge over the Sakai River.

“Where are we going?” Asked Tomoe in confusion at Sakuta’s actions.

“Over there.”

Their destination came into sight as soon as they reached the other shore, a rectangular building looking out to the sea... the aquarium.

After buying two tickets and entering the aquarium, Sakuta and Tomoe were greeted by sea creatures of various sizes from the local Sagami Bay. They flitted around a huge tank which was tall enough that it reached the lower floor. There were triangular-headed sharks, tasty looking bream, and refined sea turtles. Two stingrays swam next to each other, displaying their face-like stomachs to the onlookers. Thousands of sardines formed into groups and swam in a circle right in the middle of the tank.

Small children pressed their faces into the glass, gazing at the sea creatures living out their lives. Tomoe had found a niche for herself as well, getting a special seat as a huge shark suddenly swam past her face.

She let out a cute shriek and fell backwards, her prized backside resting against Sakuta’s feet. With Rena and the others watching, Sakuta acted like a boyfriend and held out his hand, helping her up.

He had thought the entrance fee would mean they wouldn’t be followed, but he had misjudged it. However, it was easier to control their movements than outside, and he planned to launch a counterattack when he saw the chance. Sakuta wasn’t the kind of person to let himself be made into an exhibit.

Following on from the vivid fish living in the warm waters, there were strange creatures that lived in the deep sea. The jellyfish area was darker than the rest of the aquarium and felt rather like a planetarium. Several couples stopping to take photos caught his eye.

The jellyfish moved languidly through the water.

“They’re cute,” said Tomoe, taking her phone out to take pictures as well.

There’s some that look like snacks, thought Sakuta.

“That one’s like a macaron,” Tomoe chimed in, apparently thinking the same, “Senpai, take a picture.”

Sakuta took the phone and put Tomoe and the jellyfish in frame.

“Not like that,” she corrected him, looking at the couple that were shoulder to shoulder next to a neighbouring tank. The boyfriend was holding the phone in an outstretched hand, taking a picture of them both.

Acceding to her wishes, Sakuta approached Tomoe, slightly brushing against her and making her jump. A glance at her face revealed her nervousness.

Sakuta let the shutter close regardless.

They looked over the picture, and as he’d thought, Tomoe’s expression was stiff.

“Senpai, your eyes look dead.”

“They’re just the same as normal.”

“You’re always dying then,” laughed Tomoe, her nerves apparently settled.

They continued along the route through the building and noticed a large group of people gathering in one area. They were gathered around a tank with a reproduction of a stony beach inside, and about fifteen Humboldt penguins.

It looked like a show was just going on as an attendant came in through the entrance.

“Wanna watch?” Asked Sakuta.

“Yeah.”

The attendant was giving a concise explanation of the characteristics of this particular species of penguin. Apparently, the pattern on each bird’s stomach was different, with siblings and parents having similar patterns to each other. He picked up one of them and brought it over to the glass.

The other penguins gathered around his feet. When he moved to the right, they tottered after him, and when he moved to the left, they tottered back again.

The crowd cooed over the penguins’ adorableness.

“They’re cute, so cute,” said Tomoe, needless to say, her eyes were shining as well.

The next charming scene was to be a swimming performance. When Sakuta started wondering about how they’d do that, the attendant threw some small fish into the water with a yell.

The penguins simultaneously leapt in, cutting through the water like a curtain of bullets. They looked like they were flying through the water, while unable to fly in the sky, apparently, they flew underwater.

“That penguin...” started Tomoe.

“Hm?”

Tomoe was looking at a corner of the rocky area where there was a single penguin napping while the others all raced around after the fish.

“He’s sorta like you.”

“My legs aren’t that short, are they?”

“It’s because he’s just doing his own thing while everyone else is performing in the show.”

“Then would you be that second, bouncy one?”

In that case, the leader would be Kashiba Rena. The fish had been mostly eaten by four specific penguins. Apparently, penguin society was hierarchical as well.

“No, I’d be... that one following everyone from behind,” said Tomoe quietly.

“It’s got a big backside as well.”

“I’m being serious here,” she protested, covering her backside as she glared up at him. Even that act itself was rather penguin-like.

“I wonder why that penguin isn’t with everyone else.”

The penguin in the corner woke from its nap and shook its head from side to side.

“He’s finally awake, the show’s already over though,” said the attendant, noticing it, inviting laughter from the audience.

Regardless of this, the penguin just went back to sleep, making the spectators laugh even more.

“He’s fine being laughed at by everyone... he really is just like you,” said Tomoe triumphantly with a smile.

Thus, the penguin show came to an end with thunderous applause.

The crowd started to disperse.

Sakuta left Tomoe at the seal tank and left towards the toilets. He didn’t go to the toilet however and circled around through the aquarium to where he had spotted Rena, Hinako, and Aya during the show.

He’d had to go back to near the entrance, so he walked quickly to find them in the shadow of a pillar in the gift shop, watching Tomoe as she peered at the seals.

“See any rare fish?” Sakuta asked as he approached them from behind.

Hinako and Aya both startled, and Rena turned around to look at him with an expression of innocence on her face.

“You’re here too, Senpai?” She answered brazenly in kind.

“Man, schoolgirls have a relaxed life.

“We’re busy.”

“You don’t look it.”

“What about you? Should you really be leaving Tomoe on her own?”

“Hey, look!” Interjected Hinako, wearing her elegant glasses again, her eyes looking out from behind them past the pillar at Tomoe.

Not seeing the harm, Sakuta joined her.

Tomoe was being talked to by two men. They both had brown hair, with chains hanging from their waists and sandals on their feet. They looked like they were inviting her to watch the dolphin show as they gestured outside.

“They look kinda scary,” said Hinako. As Tomoe seemed to wave a hand in front of her chest in negation, one of them grabbed her wrist. Hinako looked to Rena for advice, asking, “What do we do?”

Sakuta passed by her side and left the shadow, striding over to Tomoe.

“Eh, I take my eyes off you for a minute and you get hit on?” He asked, lightly smacking the crown of her head before pulling her from the men by her shoulders.

“So you’ve got a boyfriend?” The one man said, a bit of anger in his eyes.

“You were gone too long, Senpai,” Tomoe protested quietly.

“It was a big one,” he said. He’d actually gone for a completely different reason, but that should be plenty to turn the brown-haired duo off.

“You’re really something, talking about shit on a date,” came the scornful rejoinder from the one of them before they both left.

“Were they guys your friends had the hots for too?” Sakuta asked quietly as they watched the pair swagger away.

“No way,” replied Tomoe at a similar volume.

“Then turn them down straight off.”

“I would, but...”

“But what?”

“They surprised me when they just started talking to me out of nowhere.”

“Considering *you*, you should get used to it quickly.”

The neighbourhood would be opening up for beach season soon, and there would be pickup artists on the prowl.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Have you not seen your face?”

“I see it every day.”

Tomoe looked at her reflection in the tank glass.

“What do you think?”

“...That it’s not mine,” Tomoe murmured, bowing her head.

Sakuta and Tomoe left the aquarium and stepped onto the Benten Bridge that went to Enoshima itself. The sound of the wind and waves wrapped around them with the salty air from the sea. The tide wasn't too high, so it felt like you could just keep walking on the surface.

Tomoe had her gaze on the ground and seemed listless, like she'd been thinking on something since they had left the aquarium.

"Did you want some submissive play or something?"

"No."

"Are we supposed to be an arguing couple then"

Tomoe slowly closed the distance between them. When she arrived next to him, she rested her hands on the handrail next to them and let out a sigh as she was dyed red by the setting sun coming through gaps in the clouds.

"I told you I came from Fukuoka, right?"

"Boasting about your hometown?"

"No."

"What is it then," asked Sakuta as he turned around, leaning against the rail next to her.

"I wasn't like this before middle school," she spoke as she gazed at the sea, "want to see a picture?"

"Not really."

"Here," she said, thrusting her phone in front of his face so he ended up seeing it even if he didn't want to.

In the picture, she was wearing an old-fashioned sailor uniform, and an unfashionable, knee-length skirt. And on top of all of that, her hair was pulled into two wonderful braids either side of her head.

"This is... *rustic*."

"That's why I didn't want to show you."

“Weren’t you the one that forced it in front of my face?”

“Dad got re-assigned at work so we came to Tokyo.”

“This is Kanagawa though.”

“Don’t sweat the little things, it’s Tokyo.”

“Well, whatever.”

“I was in a group in the background at school as well.”

“Hmmm.”

“I thought that I’d definitely get bullied in the city, get called lame and have no friends.”

“Well, I guess that happens.”

“So when I found out we were moving here in January... I used the three months until we left to do a lot of research,” Tomoe said, twining a finger into her hair, “I started with makeup, then I went to a fancy hairdresser and got a new hairstyle... I started copying fashion magazines with my clothes, practised my accent... and I ended up like this.”

“Do you not like it?”

“Eh?”

“Do you not like how you are now?”

Tomoe grew thoughtful at the question, and after a while answered as if affirming her own feelings: “...I do, I really do.”

“Then what are you worrying about? It’s too depressing.”

“W-what’s that supposed to mean!?”

“Are you doing the usual teenager thing and going on about how this ‘isn’t the real you’?”

“Y-yeah.”

“So laaame.”

“You’re mean!”

“Well, it’s all good.”

“What is?”

“This is you. Whatever you were before, this is you now.”

“How come you can say that?” Tomoe levelled a suspicious gaze at him.

“Whatever started it, you put the effort in to end up like this, yeah?”

“Y-yeah...”

“And you like how you are now?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what are you on about with ‘this isn’t me’?”

She didn’t answer.

“...So don’t worry about it.”

“...I don’t like it.”

“Huh?”

“It feels like you just played me.”

“Hey, I-”

Just as Sakuta was about to complain, Tomoe’s attention was diverted to her phone.

“Ah, it’s from Rena-chan...”

She fiddled with the screen, opening the message.

“What is it?”

“...‘You look like you’re getting on well. Senpai seems like a surprisingly good person too.’”

“She didn’t need to add the ‘surprisingly’.”

“‘Senpai says that you didn’t need to add the “surprisingly” and sent.’”

“Don’t send that.”

“I already have... Ah, a reply, she said ‘huh?’”

“Did she?”

Joining in schoolgirls’ conversations was just tiring.

“Come on, we’re going to Enoshima, right?”

“Yeah... ah, wait!” Tomoe noticed something and ran out onto the beach at the side of the bridge. The sun was setting and the beach was sparsely populated, one of them had caught her eye, a girl judging by her outfit, who was looking down and searching for something. Even from here, they could see she was worried. “That’s Yoneyama-san.”

“You know her?”

“She’s my classmate, Yoneyama Nana-san.”

It really is just like her to make sure to learn her full name, thought Sakuta, he himself not remembering nearly any of his classmates’ full names.

Tomoe turned her back on Enoshima and returned to the bridge, left the road and staggered slightly onto the beach. Going to Enoshima on his own would be pointless, so Sakuta followed her.

As they approached the water’s edge, Yoneyama Nana’s features became distinct. She wore black-rimmed glasses and had her hair tied into two bunches like a middle schooler, hanging onto and then off the front of her shoulders. Her skirt fell to her knee and she wore a navy blue cardigan on her upper half. She was about the same height as Tomoe and seemed like a reserved girl at first glance, one that would fit right into the library.

She seemed close to tears and was pacing back and forth on the sand.

“Yoneyama-san!” Tomoe called out, making Nana freeze in fright. When she noticed Tomoe she stiffened in surprise again.

“Did you do something to her? She’s pretty skittish,” Sakuta muttered to Tomoe.

“I-I didn’t do anything!” She replied at the same volume.

“Koga-san... A-and that guy that came back to being desirable.”

“So that really is a thing with the first-years,” Said Sakuta. Nana met his eyes

and showed even greater fright than before.

“I-I’m sorry,” she apologised.

“What about *you*, Senpai, what’d you do?” Interjected Tomoe, just at the right moment.

“Nothing yet.”

“Don’t do anything either,” said Tomoe, giving him a warning glance, “Yoneyama-san, what’s wrong?”

“Eh, nothing,” she said, pulling herself together and speaking softly.

No matter what she said, she certainly looked like something was wrong.

“Are you looking for something?” Tomoe changed the question.

“Y-yeah,” Nana nodded.

It didn’t seem to be that something had happened between them, Nana was just shy and shocked at being spoken to by Tomoe, who she hadn’t spoken much with during classes. Then her being together with Sakuta, who had several unpleasant rumours circulating about him, made them seem even more distant.

“I’ll look too. Did you drop something?”

“I-it’s fine, I mean, you’re part of Kashiba-san’s group.”

Sakuta thought that was a rather interesting denial. But at the same time, he had a feeling that those words showed how the power was distributed in their class.

There was a definite difference between Yoneyama Nana, who seemed rather plain, and Tomoe and her group, who seemed to radiate fashion. He almost wanted to tell Nana about how Tomoe looked even plainer back during middle school but decided not to with how he had only just gotten Tomoe to accept her effort.

“Three pairs of eyes are better than one,” he said, directing his eyes to the sand, even though he didn’t know what he was looking for.

“See, Senpai said he’d help too.”

“R-right... it’s a phone strap.”

“What kind?”

“It’s got a little jellyfish on it, I bought it at the aquarium.”

“What colour is it?”

“It’s transparent, but kinda blue I guess.”

“Is it important to you?”

“Yeah... I bought it with a matching one for my friend during Golden Week.”

Losing just the one of a pair would make anyone feel bad. He’d question why she couldn’t just buy a new one, but it wouldn’t have the same meaning as the one that she bought with her friend to Nana.

“Are you sure you dropped it around here?” He asked instead.

“I-I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

“You don’t need to apologise.” He said as she grew frightened when they met gazes again, so Sakuta just looked down again and waved his hand around, a little depressed that she was so obviously scared of him.

“Senpai’s weird, but he’s not scary,” came Tomoe’s backhanded compliment. From his point of view, Tomoe was plenty weird herself...

“R-right,” Nana replied, keeping an obvious distance between her and Tomoe as well.

There was a strange tension in the air as they searched fruitlessly for about half an hour. The sun had set and it was getting hard to see. Things were reaching the limit of a group of three that didn’t really get along.

Just as Sakuta was thinking they might have to call it quits, Sakuta saw a glint at the water’s edge.

There, lying on the wet sand, was a jellyfish phone strap.

“There it is,” he yelled unintentionally.

“Really?”

Tomoe and Nana came rushing over.

Sakuta went to pick it up, but the next wave made him hesitate, and while he couldn't see it, there was a shadow in the water.

"Ah, Koga-san," before Nana's warning was complete, Tomoe had plunged her hands into the sea. In the next moment, a suspiciously large wave covered Tomoe completely where she was leaning forwards.

Tomoe let out a scream of shock and lost her balance, falling backwards, getting soaked all over.

"Oi, you good?"

In response to Sakuta's question, Tomoe turned back with a smile.

"I got it," she said, holding up the strap, not seeming to realise that he was asking after *her*.

"Are you okay, Koga-san?"

She wasn't no matter how you looked. She was definitely soaked to the bone, her white blouse clinging to her skin, showing her underwear and skin.

Sakuta stepped into the water in his shoes and pulled Tomoe up. Tomoe tripped on the sand and held on to Sakuta.

"Woah, get off, you're soaked!"

"You should be happy!"

"You say, with your eyeliner melting off."

"Wah, don't look at me!" Shouted Tomoe, hiding her face, but there were other places she should be hiding.

"Your underwear's showing too, you should hide that instead."

"Ahhh, I don't have enough hands!"

"I can lend you one of mine if you like?"

Tomoe thought for a moment.

"Hey, that's obviously not going to happen!"

Watching them, Nana broke into laughter.

The day after Sakuta's date with Tomoe... June the thirtieth, arrived without fanfare.

Maybe days wouldn't repeat any more, maybe the Adolescence Syndrome causing it had been cured.

With these things occupying his mind, Sakuta headed in to school, where he happened to arrived at the Fujisawa Enoden station with Tomoe.

He couldn't just ignore her among the other students from their school. After all, he was her 'more than schoolmate, less than boyfriend'. He should talk with her like that. So thinking, he addressed her.

"Koga, want to ride together?"

"Yeah," she answered in a husky voice with a nod.

He looked into her inclined face, noticing it was strangely red.

"You got a cold, huh?"

Getting soaked by the sea yesterday was probably the cause. That and not being able to ride the train, so walking the approximately thirty kilometres to Fujisawa while sodden and dripping.

It might be summer, but that was too negligent.

"I'm completely fine," she said, her eyes blank in contrast to her words. She didn't even have the energy to look up at Sakuta, and just kept looking down, seeming to struggle to breathe even.

"You don't look fine at all," Sakuta said, putting a hand on her forehead. It was hot, too hot. Hot enough that Sakuta would have taken great joy in having the day off. And yet when the train arrived, Tomoe didn't hesitate to board it.

First of all, he sat her down in an empty seat.

"Get off at the next stop and go home," he instructed.

"Don't wanna," came her childish reply.

"Do you like school that much?"

“If I had the day off, I wouldn’t be able to keep up with the conversations.”

“It’s just a day.”

“That day’s fatal.”

Apparently, she could never relax.

“Sleep until we get there then, I’ll wake you up.”

“Thanks,” she said honestly, before relaxing and closing her eyes.

Sakuta walked with Tomoe to school, but when she couldn’t change her shoes, he dragged her to the infirmary and had the nurse look after her.

Of course, he ignored her croaky ‘Traitooor’ as he left.

Sakuta crept out of the school at lunchtime, walking to a nearby shop and hurriedly finishing his shopping and returning before a teacher realised he was missing, then showed up in the infirmary.

Rena, Hinako, and Aya were gathered around the bed that Tomoe was lying in. When the three noticed Sakuta enter, they left, with a teasing instruction for the pair to enjoy themselves.

The nurse was also absent, perhaps running some errand.

“Feeling any better?” Asked Sakuta as he sat down on a stool at the side of the bed.

“Yeah,” Tomoe answered quietly, but louder than that morning.

“Want some canned oranges?” He asked as he dropped the bag of shopping on the table attached to the bed.

“It’s against the rules to leave school during the day.”

“If you don’t want them...” he said, taking the tin of oranges from the bag.

“I’ll have them,” she rushed out, trying to take the tin.

“Wait a minute.”

“Whyyy, they’re f’r me, right?”

Sakuta took out a bag of crushed ice.

“Ice?” Asked Tomoe in confusion.

Sakuta ignored her question and added water to the ice, then put the tin in the mixture, turning it every so often.

“Senpai, what’cha doin’?”

He was copying a quick-cooling method that Rio had used once. After about two minutes, he took the tin out, opened the lid and put it in front of Tomoe this time.

“I can feed you them if you like.”

“It’d be hard to eat like that, so I’m good.” She used the included fork and took a mouthful. “Ah, it’s really cold!”

Tomoe smiled in happiness.

“Don’t watch me eat,” she told Sakuta as he looked at her carefully.

“Why?”

“It’s embarrassing.”

“You what?”

Sakuta’s doubts just grew, but bothering his weakened junior didn’t appeal to him, so he stood and opened the window a little, letting a salty breeze in to the air-conditioned room.

“Ahhh, the smell of the sea,” said Tomoe, the natural scents of the sea breeze apparently making her feel better as soon closed her eyes for a while.

“Hey, Senpai?” She said after a while of sitting like that.

“Hm?” He replied, leaning out of the window.

“Why did you listen to my ridiculous request?”

“Would that be the one to be more than your schoolmate, less than your boyfriend?”

“The one to me more than my schoolmate, less than my boyfriend, yes.”

Sakuta watched the many surfers skimming across the waves of the sea by Shichirigahama.

“Because you asked so earnestly.”

“Even though you barely knew me?”

“We’re backside-kicking buddies, right?”

“Geez, I was being serious,” she said, looking over her shoulder at him and sulkily holding her fork in her mouth.

“Back then though, I thought you were a nice girl,” he insisted.

She had thought a pervert was assaulting a small girl and so had kicked Sakuta as hard as she could in the backside. It was a misunderstanding, but not everyone would have had the courage to do such a thing, and Tomoe’s stance on that sort of thing was shown once again the day before when she helped search for Yoneyama Nana’s strap.

“And so you helped me?”

“Well, it was also ‘cause you’re cute.”

“You’re messing around agaaaain.”

“I don’t know if I’d have done the same thing if you were ugly, that’s what guys are like.”

“...You would have,” said Tomoe in a quiet voice, and Sakuta decided that he couldn’t hear.

“I’m not so kind that I help everyone.”

“But in exchange, you’re kind to some people.”

“Well yeah, even I want some people to think I’m half decent.”

“Hmmm.”

Tomoe still didn’t seem to fully agree, but she didn’t seem to want to keep going. She finished eating the fruit and drank the leftover juices in a single gulp.

“Koga, do you have anyone you like?” Sakuta asked.

“Eh!?” She yelled in shock at the sudden question, “W-why would you ask something like that?”

“I just figured rumours about you dating me would cause an issue if you were

pinning after someone.”

“I’m not, so that’s fine.”

“Anyone you’re interested in?”

“There’s not.”

“Hehhh, such a waste.”

“I don’t have time for things like that.

“Well yeah, you’ve got to keep up with the videos your friends send.”

“I don’t like your tone there.”

“I guess that means that you’ve got doubts about it yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If you were fine with how things were going, you wouldn’t care about how I said it.”

“...I would,” she said after thinking it over in silence for a few moments, “I care about how people see me. Even while I’m sitting here in the infirmary, I’m worrying about what everyone in the classroom is thinking.”

“You’re too self-conscious.”

“You’re the weird one, Senpai. How can you keep coming to school when everyone looks at you like a freak and makes fun of you? How can you keep going? You’re too insensitive.”

“Man, you’re asking some awful questions. Right to my face too.”

“Uh, sorry.”

“They didn’t hurt, so it’s fine.”

“I’m not sorry then,” she muttered, her gaze seeming somewhat serious to Sakuta, asking him to answer properly with her eyes.

Sakuta couldn’t stand against that look so just looked back outside again and started talking, as if to himself.

“It’s just ‘cause I don’t really live to be liked by everyone.”

“I want everyone to like me... or at least, not hate me.”

“I’m fine with just one person. As long as that one person needs me, I can keep going.”

Sakuta broke the seal on the box of onigiri he had bought for himself, stuffing the nori-wrapped rice into his mouth, enjoying eating while watching the sea. That on its own made choosing this school worth it.

“Even if rest of the world hates you?”

“That’d be better, right?”

“I wonder.”

“Well, you’ll get it one day, Koga,” Sakuta ended the conversation before it grew even more embarrassing.

“You looking down on me like that’s irritating,” pouted Tomoe. Sakuta lightly laughed at her expression but his laughter soon died away, having realised why he was treating her as much younger than him.

On her first day of work, he had thought of her as a clumsy junior, but talking with her like this had made him realise she was really taking in and understanding his, both what he was saying, and what he *wasn’t*.

More accurately, Tomoe was strongly focused on what was going on around her so she didn’t miss anything. To put it nicely she could read the atmosphere properly, conversely, it could be put as her paying *too much* attention to the atmosphere. Then, she would choose how she acted based on that atmosphere. That was why she had started to wear makeup, had changed her hairstyle, and had become more fashionable.

This lie about them dating was the same thing.

Doing this, she avoided conflict with her surroundings, even in the form of slight frictions, and lived well. She put a lot of effort into not causing discord, and was always paying attention so she didn’t cause problems.

It was a way of living that Sakuta would never be able to imitate, it’d definitely exhaust him.

“Senpai, you’re thinking something rude, aren’t you?”

“No, not really.”

“You definitely are.”

“If anything, I’m thinking something really nice.”

“What do you mean?”

Sakuta ignored her question and answered with another.

“Say, Koga, if you ended up liking the same person as your friend Rena, what would you do?”

He could imagine the answer without actually asking the question, the reason he bothered was to make her realise it. There were frictions in relationships that you couldn’t avoid and pass through. Doing so would make that friction wear *you* down.

“If we liked the same person, I’d never tell Rena-chan.”

“What about if you like the same person as your friend Hinako?”

“I wouldn’t say.”

“If it was your friend Aya?”

“I wouldn’t say.”

“So you’d just give up.”

“I think so.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Don’t ask then,” It was best to decide to give up and do so while you could. When your feelings were at that point, it didn’t matter, but issues arose when feelings you hadn’t taken into account came into the picture. Tomoe’s answer now was inescapable, and she felt the danger in it.

“Yes, little one.”

“D-don’t treat me like a kid.”

“It’s coming out with lines like that that make you seem like a kid, isn’t it?”

“Uggghhh...” she moaned, before continuing, “Oh yeah, Senpai, that reminds me...”

“Hmm?”

“How’d things end up with Sakurajima-senpai?”

“I’m waiting for her answer.”

“Eh!? She didn’t reject you yet!?”

“If that loop hadn’t happened, she’d have agreed to start dating.”

“No way!?”

“It’s the truth.”

“No, that’s definitely a lie.”

“Why won’t you beli-”

“I mean, it’s Sakurajima-senpai, right? The actress Sakurajima Mai! That one, right!?”

“Yeah.”

“And has she said ‘I love you’?” Asked Tomoe with a doubtful gaze.

“Well... no.”

“See, I’m sure you were just imagining it.”

It was the truth that Mai had never said it, and it was also the truth that he wanted her to. That would be nice for their relationship too.

Tomoe’s strange insistence on pointing it out made him all the more aware of it. In the end, whether Mai liked him, the solid month of confessions made it seem rather throwaway, and she also ignored the last confession, so it did rather seem that she agreed to get him to stop. That thought brought a touch of unease to Sakuta’s chest.

“I’ll do my best to get her to say it when I confess next.

“You’ll definitely get rejected,” said Tomoe, still disbelieving.

“Well, anyway, this term has to finish first.”

They were deceiving the school for this term, if they didn’t overcome that, there was no bright future awaiting either of them.

“...Yeah.”

Fortunately, Rena and the others didn't show any sign of noticing the lie. Currently, it seemed like they'd be able to finish the three following weeks fine. The one thing that couldn't be predicted was Maesawa-senpai's actions.

Regardless of their lie being discovered, if Rena were to discover about his confession, that would be the end. They couldn't let Rena-chan hear about what they were actually aiming for.

They couldn't look at things optimistically anymore.

4

The next day was Tuesday, and marked the calendar's transition into June. Tomoe had had a fever the day before and so spent the entire day in the infirmary, therefore, she finally conceded and had taken the day off.

However, she was completely back to normal on Wednesday, and when the bell sounded for lunch, she arrived at Sakuta's classroom holding a tin of peaches.

His classmates had questioning gazes as to why a peach can.

It was probably a thanks for the oranges on Monday, but Sakuta had to tease her.

“Is it supposed to be for your peach-shaped backside?”

Immediately, Tomoe's hands covered herself.

“No being perverted,” she said while pursing her lips.

“I'll enjoy these tonight, thinking of them as yours,” he continued further, making Tomoe snatch it back from him.

“M-moron!” She ran from the classroom, her face flushed in embarrassment.

“I guess I went too far,” he said, resolving to barely toe the line next time.

He could feel the girls glaring at him in scorn for his sexual harassment, and the boys glaring at him in jealousy at the flirting. None of them seemed too surprised to see them together.

That typified the LTE-era, rumours about the two of them had completely permeated the school.

Tomoe hadn't bounced back even after school. They were on the same shift, but each time they bumped into each other while working, she would hide her backside and glare at him like they had a blood feud...

Unfortunately, however, she wasn't the slightest bit scary.

At eight o'clock that night, the dinner rush finally showed signs of calming, the number of customers arriving decreased, and the orders for the customers already there were finished. Even the cooking was mostly done.

Tomoe approached Sakuta as he stood at the till.

"There's something I want to tell you."

"If it's about my lack of delicacy, I'm well aware."

"I've already given up on you with that."

"What is it then?"

Tomoe looked up at Sakuta in silence for several moments, her nerves obvious. It must be something important that she was about to say.

"My backside really isn't that big."

And yet, despite the apparent importance, it was her backside that she wanted to talk about.

"My my, so humble!" Sakuta proclaimed while patting her consolingly on the shoulder.

"What's with that reply!?"

"Have more confidence."

"In what!?"

"In your peachy backside."

"I said I don't have one!"

"Now now, that's not at all true."

"Fine then! I won't talk to you."

She seemed to be in a seriously bad mood this time as she strode grandly away.

However, a moment later, she took an order that contained alcohol, which she had never dealt with before, so came timidly back.

“What should I do about the beer?” She asked awkwardly as she fidgeted.

Sakuta pretended not to here as he refilled the glasses on the drinks bar.

“Don’t ignore me,” she said, fiddling with her apron.

Silence continued to reign.

“P-please, tell me,” she was on the verge of tears, “I-I’ve got confidence in my backside.”

At this, Sakuta finally looked at here.

“And the peaches?”

“F-fine! I’ll admit it, I have a peach-shaped backside.”

She had completely given into despair.

“I see, I guess I’ve got to tell you then.”

“You meanie, Senpai.””

With Sakuta teasing Tomoe like this, they both worked until nine that night. Sakuta saw her to near her house and then arrived back at his own for about half-past.

He switched places with Kaede, who had just finished her own both and washed off the day’s sweat.

Once he felt refreshed, he left the bath and after pulling on his underwear went to the fridge and poured himself a glass of the sports drink in the fridge before downing it in a single gulp. The chill on his heated body was pleasant. It was a drink he’d always liked, but Mai had been in an advert for it so he felt like he should re-evaluate how it tasted. Each time he drank it he remembered Mai.

Thinking of Mai, she was in Kagoshima recording for a TV drama this week. It was already ten o’clock, but Sakuta thought she was probably still recording. Or maybe she’d have returned to the hotel and gone to sleep by now, he couldn’t

really imagine much about the world of show-business.

He poured himself another glass and drank it slowly this time, in three sips.

He washed the glass and put it on the draining board when the phone rang.

He picked up the handset as he dried his hands on a towel.

"Hello, it's Azusagawa."

"It's me."

Sakuta knew who it was at the very moment they answered.

"Mai-san, what's wrong?"

"I thought you'd want to hear my voice so I phoned."

"I was actually just thinking about you."

"I hope you're still wearing your underwear," she seemed to jump right to distrusting him, "I understand that you can't help that kind of thing, but..."

She seemed to have already decided that he was doing the act.

"I'm wearing just my underwear actually."

"Huh? Why just your underwear?"

"I just got out of the bath."

"Huh, surprisingly normal," she said, apparently displeased with that?

"On nights where I lie tossing and turning, I may turn to you for assistance."

"Right right, do what you like," she said.

He'd thought she would get embarrassed at that, but she'd just gone right along with it.

"How are things there?" She asked.

"Well, everything pretty much the same as always."

"Was the date with your cute girlfriend fun?"

"Well, in a way."

Getting new reactions from Tomoe had been a fun pastime.

“Hmmm,” came Mai’s bored-sounding replay.

“Was there even a right way to answer that?”

“Running off from your house right now and coming to see me in Kagoshima?”

“And then I can hold you?”

“That’s not happening,” she said, her displeasure beating into his eardrum. Apparently, she *really* didn’t want to.

“What about you? Have you done anything other than filming?”

“I ate a polar bear.”

“You’re a real carnivore, huh?”

“It was just shaved ice.”

“I knew that really, it’s the one with fruits on, right?”

“I’m bored,” she said in her queenly tone. *Royals are pretty unreasonable*, thought Sakuta.

But even so, her voice was taut, and sounded like she was exulting in something. She was probably excited at being able to act again.

“Are you having fun at the filming?”

“I am,” she answered honestly without a moment’s hesitation, “what do you want as a job?”

“Students don’t normally think of their careers.”

“That’s a waste.”

“Well, I guess maybe I could be Santa Claus.”

“Because you’d have three hundred and sixty-four days off?”

“You caught me.”

“If you say stupid things, you’ll become an idiot. Anyway, night.”

“Ah, yeah, good night.”

Sakuta waited for Mai to hang up before putting the receiver down.

As the weekend arrived, the Japanese Meteorological Association announced the end of the rainy season for the Kanto region. Summer had finally arrived and the temperatures would only rise from here. Even the beaches suddenly grew more active, regardless of the beach season only starting next week.

Sakuta had seen several groups of university students around for flying visits, and Shichirigahama beach was seeing more surfers enjoying the waves.

Sakuta and Tomoe's ashen lie continued even during the vivid blue season of sun and sea as they kept a careful distance between them like they'd just started dating.

They didn't go out of their way to be lovey-dovey, and only walked together to school if they happened to meet up on the way, with Tomoe prioritising her social life.

Their relationship was now known throughout the school and Sakuta often had his classmates giving him curious looks like they wanted to ask him something.

However, despite the clear curiosity, not one person had the courage to come forward and ask him. Of course, none of them thought of them as 'false lovers'.

Obviously, no one would think one of their classmates would be able to deceive everyone like that, and no one was going out of the way to confirm or deny the rumours going around. It was just seen as 'someone else's problem'. Honestly, Sakuta was grateful for the lack of care people seemed to be showing. Maybe because of that, his worry over being found out was unnecessary.

There was another source of unease dwelling within his heart though. It seemed likely that this had happened because of Adolescence Syndrome on Tomoe's part, and that hadn't been conclusively settled.

Because of that, he checked the date each morning when he got up, and it was becoming a habit.

As of now, a day hadn't repeated since the twenty-seventh of June, but not knowing when it might happen meant he couldn't relax. And his sense of

unease hadn't abated even now it with the fifth of July, a week after they had escaped from the repetition.

Sakuta waited for school to finish, and then visited the physics lab.

"Futaba, you there?" he called as he opened the door.

He saw her white-coat clad form by the window, talking with someone on the other side. That person was wearing a T-shirt and jogging shorts. It was Yuuma, with a basketball in hand, probably on his way to club activities.

Rio and Yuuma both looked towards the door at the same time upon his arrival.

"Sorry for interrupting," he said after examining their faces, then turning about on his heel and shutting the door.

He'd been going to ask about Adolescence Syndrome but it would be better to wait for another day it seemed.

The door then burst open from inside, an unusually panicked Rio having opened it.

"Are you an idiot, Azusagawa!? You are, aren't you!?"



She kept rambling in a small voice, glancing back at Yuuma every so often. Yuuma himself was spinning the basketball on his finger.

“Well, I’m more of an idiot than you.”

“Don’t give me help like that, Kunumi’ll notice.”

“If he noticed from something like that, he’d have already noticed your feelings ages ago.”

Anyway, there was a fairly high possibility he was just pretending that he hadn’t noticed.

“That... would be a problem.”

Rio murmured in a practically silent voice, her face instantly flushing red.

It would be too mean to keep teasing her now, so Sakuta entered the classroom.

“We were just talking about you actually,” said Yuuma as he approached the window.

“How cruel, insulting me behind my back.”

“Are you actually dating Koga-san?” Yuuma asked straightforwardly, ignoring Sakuta’s joke.

“I am.”

“Seriously!?”

“Well, it’s sort of like a trial still.”

“Hmmm.”

Yuuma didn’t seem convinced, and he could feel some doubt from Rio when she arrived in the middle of their conversation. He had an idea why Rio would. He had been talking to her about Adolescence Syndrome and told her that Tomoe was Laplace’s Demon before.

Even so, she didn’t question him further.

“Well, I should tell you this then,” he said, bouncing the ball off the floor, “it’s

about Koga-san.”

Sakuta could tell he didn’t want to say.

“What about her?”

“There’s been some nasty rumours going around.”

“Like her having bad taste in men?”

That seemed likely, considering Sakuta’s reputation within the school. He might have pulled it around with the first-years, but the second and third-years were still stuck in the rumour about the hospitalisation. It was like a sticker, once you were labelled, then even tearing that label off would still leave traces behind.

“People are saying she’s easy, a slut, and that you’re going at it like rabbits.”

Yuuma’s voice grew quieter as he spoke, maybe out of consideration for Rio. Realising that, Rio didn’t force herself into the conversation and just seemed as if she happened to be listening.

“The hell?”

It was the first time Sakuta had heard this.

“I saw it in the team’s group chat,” Yuuma continued, Sakuta more or less got it at that. “You asked about Yousuke-senpai at work, right?”

Yuuma’s expression was serious as he spoke darkly about the source of those rumours.

“The girls are talking about it in our classroom too,” Rio added nonchalantly.

Apparently, this itself was another rumour that was pervading the school.

Sakuta figured this was going to end up being another irritating situation, but didn’t know what to say himself, and though he didn’t want to, he should probably check with Tomoe.

“I’ve told you at least,” said Yuuma.

“Yeah.”

Yuuma raised a hand as he left towards the gym for his club activities, Rio

watching him leave.

Sakuta didn't want to get in the way so turned his back, getting out a bunsen burner and lighting it, filling a beaker and putting it above the burner.

If the rumours were spreading, he had to do something.

"Azusagawa, what are you doing," asked Rio, who had arrived on the other side of the desk while he was focusing.

"For now, I figured I'd have a coffee and calm down."

"That's not what I mean, I'm salting about Sakurajima Mai."

"Where's the powder?"

There wasn't anything that looked similar in the drawers under the desk.

"Is that supposed to be 'don't ask'?" Asked Rio. Sakuta opened the drawers next to the desk and found the jar of coffee powder. "That's fine then... What did you come here for?"

"There hasn't been a day that repeated since then, so I was wondering what it was all about."

The water had boiled so he extinguished the burner and dropped the coffee powder into the beaker, slowly dying the transparent liquid black.

"Then wasn't it just like you said before?"

"Hm?"

"That first year you're dating is Laplace's Demon," Rio referred obliquely to her, evidently having noticed the truth, "That first year kept rolling the die until she got a result she wanted."

Rio rolled a die across the desk, it landing on 5, then 4, then 2.

"So," she continued, "since she's satisfied now, she doesn't need to redo it."

Rio stopped rolling the die as it landed on 1.

"She doesn't seem to realise it though."

"If she did, she'd be a real demon."

"You can say that again."

Sakuta slurped at his coffee, wrinkling his nose at the bitter taste.

“It sounds like you want it to happen again,” Rio said idly, taking her glasses off.

“I just want someone to tell me it won’t happen anymore if it won’t.”

“Did you want to redo something?” Rio asked, ignoring his words. She’d started out the conversation just to ask that.

“...”

“I see, you do.”

“Don’t you even think... ‘what if?’”

“Would it be your sister for you?”

Even as he tried to dodge the question, Rio didn’t let up, probably out of vengeance for teasing her about Yuuma.

“Yeah, is there a problem with that?”

“There’s no problem with it, I just thought it’s not like you.”

“It’s not like I actually want to do it over.”

“What is it then?”

“I just want to do things without having to think ‘what if?’.”

“I see, that’s just like you.”

“I do my best to make the most of what happens. Going back in time... that just seems like all the different possibilities would get annoying, and depressing.”

Rio ignored him and started to set up a gas burner.

Sakuta flicked the die on the desk, and it landed on 3.

“Say, Futaba.”

She seemed somewhat annoyed as she lit the flame. Like she’d asked what she wanted to ask, and didn’t care anymore.

“Can you think of a way to win against someone in a sports club that’s fitter

than you?”

Rio stopped moving and just stared in surprise for a moment, which soon transitioned into an aghast expression before she finally snorted.

“That’s not my area of expertise.”

“I guessed.”

She adjusted the airflow to the gas burner, turning the flame from red to blue.

“But...”

“Hm?”

“Humans aren’t monkeys, they can win because they use their head, right?”

That really was an answer just like her.

Chapter 4 — A Wholehearted Lie to You

1

When Sakuta returned home from work, he found a message waiting on the answering machine.

“I wonder who it is,” he muttered to himself, assuming it was their father as he pushed the button to play the message.

“It’s Sakurajima Mai. I just left Kagoshima and thought I would tell you.”

It was someone completely unexpected. Mai’s abnormally formal tone was a particularly fresh experience for him.

He played it again.

“It’s Sakurajima Mai. I just left Kagoshima and thought I would tell you,” Mai’s voice resounded from the answering machine.

“Three times’d be a bit much, I guess,” he realised, stopping himself from playing it a third time. Instead, he lifted the handset and dialled Mai’s mobile number from memory. After three rings, the call connected.

“Who might this be?”

“It’s me.”

“I know. I’ve saved your home number. I *was* just about to take a bath though.”

Her voice was somewhat tired as she just spoke what she wanted over him. It was like she was trying to tell him not to call with that kind of timing. A maiden’s heart is a complex thing.

“So you’re naked?”

“If I was, I wouldn’t have answered.”

“Why?”

“It’d be perverted, talking to a boy while I was naked.”

Sakuta agreed now that she mentioned it, he didn't want her to become promiscuous like that.

"So, what'd you want?"

Her short sentence seemed to bid him hurry up so she could bathe.

"Welcome back, Mai-san."

He heard a slightly confused breath from the other end of the phone.

"Was that it?"

"I wanted to hear something else though," Sakuta said.

"I'm not going to go 'I'm home' for you." Apparently, saying it like that didn't count. It did to Sakuta, but not to Mai it seemed. As he considered that, Mai finished with "See you." And then just hung up.

Calling back would just end up with her not answering, so Sakuta obediently returned the handset to the stand. He'd been able to find out that she'd arrived home safely, so it had already fulfilled his goal.

The next day was Monday, and they started the week with July the seventh, Tanabata. The day itself dawned without a cloud in the sky.

Sakuta switched the TV on as he ate his breakfast.

"With things as they are, Orihime and Hikoboshi should be able to meet safely this Tanabata," said the man on screen cleverly, with the usual breakfast TV presenter tone.

Following on from that, the weather report itself had the forecaster telling the viewers that temperatures were already over thirty degrees across the county with a smile on her face. Just hearing it sapped Sakuta's motivation.

He'd have skipped school if he could, but he had a reason he had to go in. And on top of that, the end of term exams began today.

Awaiting Sakuta once he had resisted the heat and made it to school were maths and English exams. He filled in all the answers in the maths exam, but couldn't follow the listening in English at all. He decided to himself that he'd find a job he wouldn't need English in for his career. Maybe becoming Santa

Claus wouldn't be possible.

The short path to the station was crowded with Minegahara High School students. It was actually more crowded than usual due to the exams meaning there were no students staying for club activities.

Soon after he left through the gates, Sakuta saw a familiar figure. It was Tomoe, her rucksack with the straps lengthened so the main bag hid her backside.

Her gaze was downcast and she seemed somewhat uncomfortable as she walked with her shoulders hunched over. Her usual companions of Rena, Hinako, and Aya were walking and laughing about ten metres ahead.

Her behaviour didn't make it look like she'd just been slightly late and was going to catch up with them, the trio seemed to be pretending not to notice her even while knowing she was there, keeping a purposeful distance from her.

Immediately, Yuuma's warnings from Friday came to mind.

After telling Sakuta that there were rumours going around, Yuuma had said: *"People are saying she's easy, a slut, and that you're going at it like rabbits."*

The small platform at Shichirigahama Station was filled with Minegahara students.

Tomoe was standing apologetically at the end of the Fujisawa-bound side. The students around her kept their distance, seeming to create an invisible wall between them. Despite being in the same actual atmosphere, a separate atmosphere seemed to envelop her.

Sakuta entered the covered area and moved next to Tomoe, ignoring the gazes of the other students before lightly poking her in the head.

"Don't look so gloomy."

"Senpai..." she said, looking up at him, before growing too conscious of everyone's looks around them and looking right back down again.

Sakuta joining her meant the people gazing did so more openly. That's not to say they were outright staring, they were mostly just sneaking glances to try and judge whether the rumours were true. There were those smiling scornfully

at them, some amusing themselves with the rumours, and others just looking down on them.

This was already an everyday occurrence for Sakuta, so he didn't think much of it, but Tomoe seemed to be trying to curl herself up next to him and hide.

Looking down at her face, he could see she wanted to be anywhere but there, making him understand she wanted to run away to a painful degree. Her uneasy eyes seemed like they might burst into tears at any moment.

This was the sort of thing Tomoe dealt the worst with, it was so she didn't end up in this kind of situation that she frantically read the atmosphere of any group she was in. She had even gone as far as to pretend to date to avoid those embarrassing gazes.

As if to land the final blow, mocking laughter came from behind.

Tomoe cowered.

With anger burning within the core of his body, Sakuta turned around to see a group of three third-years. The chains jangled from their waist, with Maesawa-senpai standing in the middle.

He met Sakuta's eyes and put a forced smile on his face.

"First-years sure are energetic recently," he said to the two of them, making sure the other students around could hear, their sight fixed provocatively on Sakuta.

It was a pretty lazy way of picking a fight, but that actually amused Sakuta more, so he let out a snort. After all, it was polite to return what was given to you.

"Huh?" Maesawa-senpai's expression suddenly grew serious and he took a step, then a second towards Sakuta, looming over him, "Did you just laugh at me?"

"I'm still laughing at you, problem?"

"You pissing around!?" He roared, grabbing Sakuta by his lapels.

"I'm just making fun of you."

Someone further in on the platform snorted.

In the next moment, a strong punch landed on Sakuta's face with a thump, and Sakuta staggered back two or three steps.

He heard a scream, probably Tomoe's. Sakuta's vision went white, and his left cheek was numb, then after several seconds began to pulse with a sharp pain. The attack was stronger than Sakuta had been expecting, being from someone about five centimetres taller than him with a toned body from basketball.

"Ow..."

You could hear a pin drop on the crowded platform.

Maesawa-senpai was drawing back for another hit.

"Senpai!" Shouted Tomoe, interposing herself between the two.

"Idiot!" Yelled Sakuta, grabbing her rucksack and pulling her back, switching positions with her.

Maesawa-senpai seemed to be surprised at her action, because his fist was still raised, but not moving. The spectators just kept on watching.

At first, Sakuta had just meant to grin and bear it, but the pain from his cheek wasn't abating, and he let himself drop into his anger.

"Senpai..." Tomoe said worriedly, tugging on his sleeve. Looking back at her tearful face put paid to any chance of Sakuta just letting it happen.

Sakuta took a big step forward, raising his fist.

Maesawa-senpai immediately lifted both of his arms into a block, leaving his legs completely open, so Sakuta drove his foot into his defenceless shin.

"Argh!" Came his yell, mixed with pain and surprise as he crouched down to hold on to his leg, "Dude, that's dirty!"

He glared hatefully.

"Right back at you!"

This time, Sakuta kicked at his face this time, using the sole of his foot in two stomp kicks.

Maesawa-senpai couldn't even break his fall and fell back onto the ground. As he glared at Sakuta, his face went red with shame, anger, and humiliation.

No one said a word, they just seemed to be in shock at the situation, and not sure how to react. They all seemed to be waiting for Sakuta to speak.

He didn't want to play into the expectation, but Sakuta said what he thought Maesawa-senpai would least want to hear.

"So lame."

Some of the onlookers started stirring, letting out stifled laughs.

"Who is!? Who!?" He yelled. Apparently, his mind wasn't working right from his anger, so even when Sakuta waited, no more words were forthcoming, and Maesawa-senpai's mouth just flapped like a goldfish's.

Instead, his two companions approached him. Sakuta ignored that and spoke to the boy on the floor.

"You should wash your face."

"Huh?"

"I stepped in some dog crap yesterday."

Maesawa-senpai hurriedly wiped at his face and sniffed his hand, inciting more laughter.

The other two who had been about to start fighting Sakuta stopped and backed away, the crap barrier impregnable.

Looking around, he could see students fiddling with their phones, tweeting and posting about what had just happened, and sending messages to their friends who weren't here.

Rena was looking at him in mute amazement, Hinako was shifting nervously next to her, and Aya was trying to calm her down.

"D-don't piss me about!" He yelled, finally standing up again.

"You're the one pissing about. If you don't want to be made a show of, don't act like a moron. You're way too lame."

"Don't piss me about!"

“You already said that.”

His speech centres seemed all messed up, as he couldn't say anything else, just repeating 'don't piss me about' like a broken record.

“Senpai, that's enough,” said Tomoe, having grabbed the back of his uniform at some point. She had a troubled expression and seemed worried about Maesawa-senpai, who was now receiving the brunt of the others' scorn. If she didn't enjoy something, she wouldn't want to subject other people to it either.

Even so, Sakuta didn't retreat and continued speaking.

“No, let me say this,” he said before returning to glaring at Maesawa-senpai and practically spitting: “Going at it like rabbits? Don't make me laugh, I'm a virgin.”

Once he was done, he took Tomoe's hand and pulled her from the station, increasing his pace with each step away from the building, and before they realised, they were running.

It wasn't because they thought that Maesawa-senpai would chase them, it was just because their emotions were running high, they couldn't help but run themselves. Happiness rushed in on them, they didn't know why they were happy, but their hearts leapt at the situation.

“Senpai, that was too much.”

“Do you think I care?”

“It was definitely too much,” Tomoe laughed as she ran.

The sound of the waves and wind calmed their racing hearts, clearing any dark patches that remained within them at the same time. Such was the strange power of the beach.

Sakuta and Tomoe had run from the station and were now walking to the west on Shichirigahama Beach, slowly getting closer to Enoshima where it floated on the waves.

“Are you coming in too?” Tomoe asked from where she had removed her shoes and socks and was playing in the water. Sakuta was about two metres from her, walking along the furthest part the waves reached.

“And who’d hold *my* shoes?” He asked in turn, having picked up hers from where she left them on the beach.

Even though it was a weekday, there was the odd person that had come to the beach. Families with small children, groups of university students, and adult couples were calling out in fun among the waves. It seemed like even the weather was blessing the first chance to use the beaches as bright laughter resounded around them.

“Senpai,” Tomoe began.

“I told you, I’m not going in.”

“That’s not what I wanted,” she said with a pout.

“What is it then?”

“Thanks.”

Sakuta didn’t answer.

“You made me really happy earlier,” she continued.

“You’re welcome,” Sakuta answer emotionlessly. His cheek still ached, and was still hot.

“I think I might get what you said before.”

“Hmm?”

“Something like even if the world was your enemy, just having one person need you was good.”

“Hey, don’t go for ‘like’, remember it properly.”

“It felt like I was really your girlfriend, like you treasured me.”

The wind and waves carried Tomoe’s happiness to him.

“I promised I’d do that for this term.”

Originally it was to be ‘more than her schoolmate, less than her boyfriend’, but he didn’t think there was a way he could seem like less now.

“A false lover would never normally go that far, they wouldn’t care that much.”

“I’m a perfectionist.”

“What, y’so st’gy.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Y’don’ even know tha’?”

Tomoe looked at him, aghast.

“I’ll tell you,” this time, she looked proud, “it means boring.”

“I wasn’t playing the fool when I said I was a perfectionist,” Sakuta said as they continued walking, “Koga?”

“Hm?”

“Thanks as well. If you hadn’t jumped in, I’d have just been pounded,” Maesawa-senpai was well-built, so another two or three hits would have meant he couldn’t counter-attack, “be careful though, you could have ended up pretty badly hurt.”

“I was just sort of frantic.”

“It’s ‘cause you’re a high-schooler of justice,” he said, remembering what happened when they first met, with her thinking he was a pervert and kicking him without a moment’s hesitation to save a little girl. He was in no doubt that that sense of justice was what defined her. When it came down to it, acting was more important than thinking, and she did so with a pure heart and desire to help. It wasn’t something anyone could do, people usually seized up when something happened. “Also, I’m sorry.”

“What for?” Asked Tomoe from his side, looking questioningly at him.

“I treated your friend’s crush awfully.”

“What do we dooo?” Asked Tomoe, stopping and her face falling.

The waves lapped at her feet.

“Well, thinking about it ain’t going to help.”

“It’s your fault! Come on and help.”

“I apologised instead.”

“You’re so irresponsi-” she started with a pout before being startled and pulling her phone from her pocket when she got a message, “Ah, it’s from Rena-chan...”

Her expression grew tense as she looked at the screen.

“What’s it say?”

““Sorry, it just happened.””

“Just, huh.” He couldn’t help but laugh.

““I’ve fallen out of love with Maesawa-senpai.””

“How terrible. Well, if a little crap on his face was enough, it wasn’t much of a crush I guess.”

People only saw what people showed, if you really loved someone, it shouldn’t matter if they showed something unsightly for a moment. Because even with that unsightliness, they were still them.

““Everyone’s revising, want to come?””

Apparently, she was happy to reconcile once the misunderstanding was resolved. Tomoe sent a reply, then her expression grew into a smile after several messages between them.

However, even once she put the phone away, she showed no sign of leaving the sea.

“You not going to go?”

“I sent that you were helping me study today.”

“And then?”

Tomoe showed the screen to Sakuta. Instead of an actual message, each of the other three had sent smirking images.

“Ah, right, Senpai?”

“Hm?”

“There’s something I want to say,” Tomoe started before fidgeting.

“Need the loo?”

“No!”

“What is it then?”

“I-I... um, I haven’t done it.”

“Done what?”

Sakuta knew exactly what she was on about, but feigned ignorance because he was enjoying her embarrassment. In the end, she seemed to know how to explain.

She took a deep breath.

“I’m a virgin!” She came out with, looking up at him.

Sakuta couldn’t hold it in anymore and burst into laughter.

“D-don’t laugh at me,” Tomoe complained, kicking at the water, splashing it at Sakuta, who neatly dodged.

“Don’t dodge!” She protested.

“Did you think I believed those rumours?”

“I didn’t, but I did think it would have been awful if you did.”

“I mean, coming out with ‘I’m a virgin!’ is pretty brave,” Sakuta said as they walked past an elderly couple walking their dog.

“D-don’t say it so loudly!”

“You’re the one that said it.”

“B-but... I wanted to make sure it was clear.”

“That yell’s clearly in my memory. Well, it’s not like I care about that.”

There would be no end to it, so Sakuta walked away from her.

“Ah, wait!”

Tomoe ran after him, splashing as she did.”

They walked on for a while, Tomoe in the water, Sakuta on the sand... They didn’t get closer than two metres apart, or further than two metres apart.

“Didn’t you say you’d had a boyfriend though?” He threw at her with a half

laugh.

“Senpai, you’re asking me that even though you know it’s a lie,” she said, looking at him with an embarrassed anger.

“I wouldn’t have thought it was weird if you did.”

“Everyone was saying that they’d had boyfriends in middle school. Rena-chan, Hinako-chan, Aya-chan, everyone. Hinako-chan is still with hers.”

“Hmmm.”

“I didn’t say that I had? Everyone just kinda said that I must have... and I didn’t want to deny it, so that’s how things ended up like this...”

“I seeeee.”

“Besides, if I said I’d never dated, I thought you’d make fun of me.”

“What on Earth are you even fighting?”

“I dunno.”

If he had to say, it was her social appearance, what everyone expected to see from her. Tomoe put in effort every day, effort she didn’t really understand, in order to protect the image of ‘Koga Tomoe’ for people. She fought on to create a ‘self’ that no one could hate. Fighting against something invisible... like the atmosphere.

“Say, Senpai?” Tomoe glanced sidelong at him while kicking at the waves.

“Hm?” Sakuta replied, taking care over where he placed his feet as if the sand would trip him up.

“How do I pay you back for this?”

The footsteps at his side stopped. Sakuta took two more steps, then a third, before he turned around and looked back at her.

Tomoe was waiting there with a serious expression.

“What are you on about with such a serious look?”

“I’m asking seriously.”

“You don’t need to pay me back. Japan already broke through the group

league.”

The other day, during the finals with the reigning champions, they had won with an explosion of aggressive footballing four years in the making.

Just as promised, Tomoe had supported them from the bottom of her heart. She had shown him a picture the other day of her wearing the uniform with the rising sun painted onto her face.

“But-”

“If that’s not enough, then come out with me this weekend.”

“Where too?”

“I got paid, so I wanted to buy my sister some clothes, but I don’t have a clue about fashion.”

“Sure...”

Even as she agreed, Tomoe didn’t seem entirely happy with things, probably not thinking it was enough to pay him back.

“Fine then, one more thing?”

“What?”

Tomoe leaned forwards eagerly.

“Once we’re done with this lie, be my friend.”

Tomoe’s eyes opened wide in shock at the unexpected request before she started to giggle, but with a slightly unhappy expression.

“Do you not want to?”

“I do, but also don’t.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Tomoe seemed to be worried about something, putting her right hand to her chest and clenching and un-clenching it, unable to calm down.

“You don’t have to you know.”

“It’s fine, I’ll be your best friend,” she said with a smile that sparkled in the summer sun.

“Nah, you just need to be my friend.”

“Why!?”

Sakuta and Tomoe had walked two stations worth of distance when they got on the train at Koshigoe Station.

Before they sat down, they checked the carriages. It had already been an hour since the confrontation with Maesawa-senpai so there were hardly any passengers wearing Minegahara uniforms. Essentially everyone had quickly returned home to prepare for the next day's exams.

Tomoe's face relaxed.

They took a pair of empty seats. There was a group of university group opposite them, cheering as the train weaved between houses.

“This is great!”

“They're so close, we're gonna hit them.”

“It's fairly novel.”

Sakuta was thinking perhaps the exact opposite... and then his eyes met Tomoe's, who seemed to be thinking the exact same thing, bringing a smile to both of their faces. It wasn't new, it was more of a nostalgic feeling, their language was confused.

“Oh yeah, Koga, where did you want to start?” Sakuta asked.

“Eh? We're actually going to study?”

“If we don't, you'll be lying to your friends.”

“...Are you good at chemistry?” She asked probingly.

“I'm probably better than you.”

“That's kinda humiliating.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“I want to find out whether you actually are.”

“Want to come over then?”

“Eh?”

“My parents aren’t home.”

“Ehh!?”

“Don’t shout on the train.”

The other passengers looked at them for a second.

“B-but, um, I’m not ready... but, um, okay.”

She started out panicked, moved to being flustered, and then embarrassed before finally nodding and agreeing quietly.

“You’re misunderstanding.”

“I-I’m not. Don’t treat me like a kid.”

“It’s just because you’ve not started to climb the staircase of adulthood.

Sakuta then spent the next several minutes explaining ten reasons that he wouldn’t lay a hand on Tomoe, one by one. Tomoe spent the time listening disinterestedly and purposefully stood on Sakuta’s foot as they got off the train.

Ten minutes or so of walking from the station brought them to Sakuta’s home once they rode the lift up five floors.

“I’m baaack,” Sakuta called as he opened the door.

“Welc...” Kaede started as she poked her head from the living room, but then she noticed that Sakuta wasn’t alone and hid behind the door, peeking out at Tomoe like an animal cornered by a predator. “Onii-chan, you brought yet another girl home.”

“Come on, come in,” he said to Tomoe, ignoring what could sound like a fairly rude statement.

“S-sorry to intrude,” Tomoe said with a polite bow, taking her shoes off and then following Sakuta’s direction into his room.

Sakuta was about to follow her in when Kaede grabbed his cuff.

“What?” He asked.

“If you’re going to bring some hostess home, call ahead,” Kaede tip-toed and whispered into his ear.

“You’ve got this wrong, Kaede.”

Besides, Tomoe didn’t really have the sex appeal to be called a hostess. She didn’t even have her hair done, and she was barely wearing any makeup. Besides, what was that about bringing one home? He’d heard of hostesses arriving at work with a customer, but never going home with one.

“How much did you pay her?”

“Her name’s Koga Tomoe, she’s in the year below me at school.”

“If you wanted someone younger, you have me!”

“What exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“I’m going to tell Mai-san.”

That was a slight issue, she *had* agreed with what was going on, more or less, but obviously, a report would displease the queen.

“Your brother’s studying now, so I’ll talk to you later,” he told Kaede, peeling her off and closing the door.

“Go ahead and sit down,” he then addressed Tomoe, offering her a cushion. She quietly knelt in proper seiza, sitting on her feet. Sakuta unfolded a collapsible table in front of her, “it’d be better if you don’t sit on your feet.”

“R-right.” Taking care not to let her skirt ride up, Tomoe moved her lower legs apart and sat between them, her legs forming a W around her.

Sakuta sat opposite her, then opened his language book for his exam tomorrow. Tomoe had opened her chemistry book but didn’t seem to be looking at it. Instead, she was surveying his room, she blushed when her gaze reached his bed, and her shoulders slumped when she reached his desk.

Finally:

“I can’t,” she yelled, flipping her book closed and shoving it into her bag, hurriedly trying to shoulder it, but not managing to get her arms through the straps, “I-I’ll study with Rena-chan and the others!”

She clattered out of his room as she chattered on.

“T-thanks for having me!” She yelled back as she burst from the front door.

“Oiii, Koga,” Sakuta called, coming out of the door with a single sandal on.

She was already in front of the lift, and the bell rang with its arrival.

After a moment, the door opened. Tomoe went to rush on to the lift, but froze, her mouth open.

There was someone in the lift.

“Ah,” said Sakuta as the person stepped out. They were wearing a Minegahara school uniform. And regardless of the summer heat, Mai was wearing black tights.

Tomoe switched places with Mai. Mai herself looked at Sakuta and Tomoe, half out of the door and just having boarded the lift respectively, comparing them.

Her shoes clicked on the hard floor as she walked towards Sakuta.

“You look like you’re having plenty of fun while I’m not here,” she said, pinching Sakuta’s nose with her slender fingers, “her face was bright red, what did you do?”

She looked reproachfully at him.

“I just said we should study together.”

“Study *what*?”

“I was doing Japanese, Koga was doing chemistry.”

“Hmmm,” looking more and more displeased, Mai tightened her grip.

Sakuta decided he should change the subject as quickly as possible.

“Mai-san... did you bring souvenirs?” He asked, seeing the bag hanging from her other hand. She still seemed unhappy, but finally released his nose.

“I did,” she said, pushing the bag onto him. Looking inside he saw it was filled with nice-looking katsuobushi, fried fish paste, and ‘custadon’, a cake that had custard cream between pieces of sponge. “They still taste good cold.”

“Thank you,” he said. Mai had done what she came to and turned back to the lifts. “Mai-san, you’re not coming in?”

“If I did, it’d be like I was trying to compete with that first-year.”

Mai gave a reason that seemed both reasonable and unreasonable, then left.

There was no point in standing in the corridor, so he went back inside, called Kaede and decided to eat the souvenirs together.

“These are good,” he said.

“They are.”

2

Tuesday was the second day of the exams. Sakuta had been called to the staffroom, then taken to the guidance counsellor’s office next door and given his exam to sit on his own.

He didn’t even need to ask why, it was because of the fight at the train station, the station staff must have contacted the school.

“Confessing during the mid-terms... fighting during the finals, do you hate exams, Azusagawa?”

“I think not having exams would be nice,” Sakuta replied.

“That’s never going to happen,” said his teacher, his voice growing harsher as he warned him. There were many onlookers, so he had heard everything about the fight. Including that Maesawa-senpai had started it.

Even so, the teacher told him to be careful. What was he supposed to be careful of in this situation? Dog faeces in the road?

According to the teacher, Maesawa-senpai actually hadn’t attended today.

Sakuta left the room when school ended to find Tomoe waiting for him. She seemed somewhat apologetic, probably worried over him being called to the office.

“Do well on your exams?” Asked Sakuta.

“Not really,” she replied listlessly, “I said I’d study with my friends, but we just ended up chatting at a restaurant.”

Sakuta set off first and Tomoe rushed after him.

“What about you, Senpai?”

“Perfectly.”

“You did well?”

“Perfectly badly.”

“Ah, you’re like me then,” Tomoe said, seeming a bit happier to find someone similar, even if it wouldn’t raise her own marks, “Ah, yeah, Senpai, get a phone.”

“Huh?”

“You know I left out of nowhere yesterday? Well, um... I was worried about what you thought about it.”

“I just thought you were an emotionally unstable girl.”

Tomoe’s face flushed at that as she seethed with anger.

“You’re supposed to be supportive!” She glared sidelong at him with a frown. “You were called by the teachers so I couldn’t talk to you earlier... and I couldn’t concentrate on my exams.”

“Don’t make it sound like my fault.”

She still seemed unhappy, pouting and looking up at him.

“But, um... was that it?” Asked Tomoe, even more reservedly.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you think anything else about yesterday?”

“I don’t really think of you much.”

“The way you say it annoys me... but I see.”

Tomoe trailed off thankfully into mutters, looking relieved. Sakuta then noticed something around her eyes.

“Did you stay up studying all night?”

It was rather tragic if she did and still didn’t do well.

“I didn’t, why?”

“You’ve got panda eyes.”

“No way!” She took out a mirror and checked. “Ahh, I really do, gotta go fix it!”

She immediately rushed off to a nearby toilet.

Sakuta was left alone and just murmured his thoughts to himself.

“It looks like the marks you get from crying a lot.”

On the next day, the Wednesday marking the mid-point of the exams, Sakuta could take his exam in his classroom.

He saw Maesawa-senpai on the way in to school that morning, apparently recovered from the shock. However, when they met gazes, his hostility was clear, so he might not have really re-thought his stance much.

The atmosphere in the carriage was the worst, with the words ‘dog crap’ being muttered around the place and people pointing at both of them. There was also the phrase ‘virgin shout’ going around, which was definitely meant to mock Sakuta, but it didn’t really matter to him.

Regardless, that was the extent of the event’s influence. He’d have thought that the commotion over it would have been a little more excessive, but with the exams going on, it was relatively reserved, everyone was just worrying about themselves.

The one thing that was utterly clear, however, was how far Sakuta and Tomoe’s relationship had pervaded through the school. They knew that Sakuta and Maesawa-senpai had had an argument, and that Sakuta had protected Tomoe, which was clearly the act of a boyfriend for his girlfriend. That bittersweet ‘more than schoolmates, less than lovers’ wouldn’t be believed now.

Their relationship ‘naturally falling apart over the holidays’... might no longer be believed even. They’d need a more concrete reason to break up.

These were the thoughts occupying Sakuta’s mind as he looked out at the sea, waiting for the exam to end.

The weather was awful on the Thursday, with spotty showers repeating over

the day. Even as the afternoon arrived, the blue sky didn't show itself, and his clothes were lying in his room, drying.

"Hey, eyes on your paper!" He was in his room with that washing hanging up, and Mai was there too for some reason.

He'd been eating peacefully with Kaede, and then once he had finished the washing, she had arrived, and given the ultimatum that she would be helping him study, thus bringing us to the present.

There was a folding table spread out in the middle of the room, with Mai and Sakuta sitting across it, and when Sakuta looked at her expression from about forty-five degrees around the table from her, he could see her displeasure.

"Mai-san, are you angry?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you came out of nowhere to make me study."

"We have exams tomorrow. I told you I'd help. Come one, solve this one," said Mai, pointing at the physics problem, a question on the Doppler effect. "You have five minutes."

She had strict principles.

"I just don't want to fail."

"Sakuta, have you thought of your path in life?"

"I'd like to stay married to you for life."

Mai wordlessly started clicking her mechanical pencil. She didn't have a notebook to hand, so she was probably planning something other than writing, like Stabbing Sakuta. He should probably keep the jokes in moderation, he decided, for his health.

"I thought I might go to university," he said. There were two conditions he would have to meet for that, the first was just a matter of academics. If he couldn't pass the exam, he couldn't go. The other was the economic situation of the house. His father had indirectly told him that a private university might be tough. "What about you?"

“I plan to go to university.”

“Aren’t you going to focus on your work?”

“I can do both. I have before after all.” She was even now, actually. “I was thinking of going to a place in Yokohama.”

Whether it was a national or city university, it would still be tough to get into.

“Well, you’re brilliant after all.”

He’d heard that she’d never had anything less than an ‘8’ on her report card.

Mai rested her chin on her hands and stared at his face. He could feel some kind of intent from her, so Sakuta looked away.

“Don’t you look away,” she scolded him. “You want to go to the same university as me, right?”

Mai’s words were exactly what he was expecting.

“Not really.”

“You do, don’t you?” Mai repeated with a smile, pointing the tip of her pencil at him.

“If I can.”

“Then shouldn’t you study properly?”

Sakuta remained silent.

“A public one should lessen the burden on your parents, and you can easily commute to Yokohama from here.”

Mai was completely right, and it removed all of his protests. The Winter Campaign had failed, and suddenly it was the Summer Campaign.

“No, it’s just, well.”

“Why so half-hearted?”

“It’s just a problem of academics,” Sakuta got average marks, a perfect, average ‘6’.

“So you just need to study.”

“I’m against it because I don’t want to do that studying.”

“Even though I’ve said this much to you?”

“There’s nothing about ‘this much’, I still haven’t heard what you want.”

At that, Mai straightened and stopped resting her head on her hands and stared fixedly at Sakuta.

“If I said ‘I want to go to university with you’, would you try hard?”

Mai’s cheeks were a little flushed. She might have been acting, but her words were like an arrow through Sakuta’s heart.

“W-what?” She asked at his look.

“I really want to push you down right now.”

“I’ll stab you.”

Sakuta raised his hands in surrender before flopping back on the floor.

“Hey, don’t slack off,” she scolded.

“I just can’t get motivated.”

“What if I said I’d teach you in the bunny girl outfit?”

“I’d be motivated in *several* ways.”

His heart pounded with anticipation at what she might teach him. Though that said, he thought it was a joke anyway.

“If you’ll study, I’ll wear it.”

“Really?” Sakuta shot upright. Mai had already opened his wardrobe and pulled out the bunny girl outfit from its bag.

“I’m changing, get out,” she said, apparently serious.

This was the best opportunity he could ever ask for, he couldn’t let the meal before him go to waste, so left the room with no complaint.

“If you peek, I’ll kill you,” she warned him gravely, closing the door from inside.

Sakuta followed Mai’s order, waiting motionlessly in the corridor. Mai was

changing in his room, separated by a single door. He really wanted to just open the door nonchalantly, but kept his desires in check.

Even without taking such a risk, he'd be able to enjoy Mai in a bunny suit if he just waited. When faced with the option of an instant of her nude, or a long time of her in that outfit... Sakuta chose the latter, believing it to be the right choice.

While he waited, Kaede watched him confusedly, but he managed to distract her by saying that Nasuno wanted feeding.

After about fifteen minutes, Mai's voice came through the door.

"I'm done."

"I'm coming in," he said, just in case.

"Go ahead."

He'd waited for the reply, and now actually opened the door.

Mai was once more sitting behind the folding table with her legs splayed behind her.

The black leotard clung to every curve of her body. Her slender legs were wrapped in black stockings. There was a bow-tie around her neck, white cuffs encircled her wrists, and a pair of bunny ears rested on her head. The high heels that went with the outfit were placed to the side because they were inside.

Just Mai changing her outfit had completely changed the atmosphere of the room.

"Come on, sit down," said Mai, her bunny ears moving with the words.

Sakuta sat at the table, his legs touching Mai's under the table. She didn't make any move to shift away, apparently allowing this level of skinship.

"Now, study," she said.



As he had promised, Sakuta opened his notebook and looked at the questions in the textbook.

However, without him even realising it, his gaze was drawn to Mai. To her smooth, bare shoulders, to her pale chest, to the soft valley between her breasts. Her hourglass figure coupled with the artistic curves of her backside and thighs were beautiful, and he wanted to keep looking forever.

“You’ve stopped working,” Mai said, pinching his nose, “don’t look at me, look at the book.”

He’d thought she would be angry, but that didn’t seem to be the case, she actually seemed rather happy to have Sakuta focused on her.

“What’s wrong, Mai-san?”

“Should there be?”

“You just don’t seem too angry.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Did something happen?”

“Not really... I just thought I should give you a treat every so often,” Mai mumbled as she turned away.

“What did you say?”

“I said that I hadn’t thought you would get in a fight for that girl.”

“Did you see that on Monday?”

“I caught the tail end of it. Ah, wash your shoes, okay?”

“I lied about stepping in crap.”

“Ah. Man, that’s just boring,” she said awfully unfairly. Trying to curry favour with a moody queen really was tough. She wasn’t to the point of jealousy, but was just treating things that didn’t amuse her as tiresome.

Mai leaned forwards onto the table, looking up at Sakuta, emphasising her chest as the movement pushed it up.

“Hey, don’t look at my chest.”

“So you just wanted me to pay attention to you?”

“I’ll hit you.”

“Leave my face,” he said, raising a joking guard as Mai punched him lightly on the shoulder before letting out a long sigh.

“Hurry up and cheer me up.”

She was demanding, but even that suited her and bothered him.

“Do you have any plans over the summer?” He asked.

“Half of it I’ll be working, you?”

“Mostly working, but I want to spend the rest with you, it’s summer after all.”

“We’re not going to the beach or pool.”

“Ehh.”

“I can’t help it, I’m an actress after all.”

She wasn’t *just* an actress, she was a popular actress known across the country. If she showed herself at a beach or pool in a swimsuit, the area would probably fall into chaos.

“Just go there with your cute girlfriend,” Mai stabbed at him disinterestedly.

“Mai-san.”

“What?”

“I love you.”

Her hand whipped out to pinch at his cheek.

“Owowowow!”

“Don’t cheat so brazenly, you’re that first year’s boyfriend right now.”

“There was a beauty in front of me, so I did it accidentally.”

“Don’t ‘accidentally’ confess to people,” she said, smiling even as her tone scolded him. It seemed that she was in a better mood and just enjoying messing with Sakuta. “Come on, study.”

“Ehhh.”

“I won’t let you sleep until you answer all of these questions.”

The page Mai had the book open to was full of physics questions. It was a rather harsh exchange to see her like this, but, a promise was a promise...

3

After school on Friday, the final day of the five day stretch of exams, Sakuta went shopping with Tomoe as they had agreed.

They rode the JR Tokaido Line from Fujisawa Station for about twenty minutes, arriving at Yokohama Station as Sakuta watched Tomoe’s face while she fervently read a fashion magazine she had taken from her rucksack.

They used the station, always under construction in some way or another, to switch to the Negishi Line. A single stop took them to Sakuragicho.

The recently built second tallest tower in Japan and the huge Ferris wheel drew the eye, a different sort of seaside city to Shichirigahama.

It was probably what most people would think of when they imagined Yokohama. Even when they left the station, they couldn’t savour the atmosphere.

“Senpai, you were originally from Yokohama, right? Or is that a rumour too?”

“I lived further inland, where you couldn’t see the sea at all. Yokohama’s a big city.”

He wondered if she was listening or not... Tomoe had taken her phone and was using it to take distant photos of the Ferris wheel. It might be a lie, but they were a couple until the end of term, so she was concentrating on making memories.

Sakuta and Tomoe first went to a big store about seven or eight minutes walk from the station. It was a new store that had been open for about a year, so of course, everything was rather clean.

It took roughly thirty minutes to finish the shopping they set out to do. With

Sakuta's suggested budget of seven or eight-thousand yen, Tomoe picked out a complete set of clothes that seemed like they would suit Kaede. They certainly seemed fashionable, and were surprisingly inexpensive.

He had some slack left in his wallet, so he should look to get her some appropriate things to wear under the clothes.

"Say, Koga?"

"What?"

"What kind of panties are you wearing?"

Silence reigned for several moments.

"Eh?" She said, her mouth dropping open.

"Are you not wearing any?"

"I am! They're no— wait, what are you making me say!? What are you asking!?"

"Nah, I just thought she'd need underwear that works for a fifteen-year-old too."

"She can just buy that herself."

"Ah, I didn't say anything about it when you were over, but Kaede's a girl that likes the house more than anyone else."

"A girl that likes the house?" Asked Tomoe in puzzlement.

"She's a shut-in, she got bullied in middle school."

"Eh, what about your mother?"

"A lot of things with Kaede weighed down on her, and we don't live together anymore. Our dad looks after her."

Tomoe looked at his face in silence.

"I finally get it."

"Get what?"

"Why you helped me."

“Man, you’re amazing at reading the atmosphere.”

There was no point in denying it now, so Sakuta admitted to it readily.

“You are too, people think you can’t and exclude you because of it... but you can, you just *don’t*.”

“Is that so?”

“It is,” Tomoe said, laughing and moving off to the left. “Wait there a minute.”

“Why.”

“I-it doesn’t matter! Just don’t move!” Tomoe told him before heading up a nearby escalator.

After about ten minutes, she returned holding an opaque blue plastic bag.

“Here.”

Sakuta took the bag and went to look inside.

“Wah, no looking!”

“Why?”

“B-because, they’re the same as the ones I’m wearing now.”

She shifted, holding her skirt down. Sakuta looked between her and the bag.

“I want to look even more now,” he said, going to look again.

“No! You can’t! Geez, Senpai, you’ll make Sakurajima-senpai hate you if you just say perverted things like that.”

“Huh?” Why was she bringing Mai up, he wondered.

“You got a nationally famous actress to like you, you’ll regret it.”

“I thought you were sure I was misunderstanding things?”

More precisely, she had asked if Mai herself had ever said so when she was in the infirmary with a cold.

“But then I saw her coming to your house.”

“Oh yeah, when she brought the souvenirs.”

They had come across each other when Tomoe had come to study.

“I’ll help you so things go well with her.”

“And who’s fault is it that we’re not dating?”

“Ugh... W-well, I’ll support you.”

“Sure sure, thanks, I appreciate the feelings... Well, what are we doing now, was there anything you wanted to buy?”

“Eh? Ah, yeah, can I just look for one thing?”

Sakuta went up a floor with Tomoe into a vivid, colourful area. There were swimsuits on sale, many different styles and colours lined up on racks.

“I promised that I’d go to the beach with Rena-chan and the others. I only have my school swimsuit... I wonder what everyone will wear.”

“Can’t you just wear your middle school one?”

“Why’d I go back to that? Ah, what about this one?”

Tomoe held a frilly pink bikini somewhat shyly in front of herself.

“Staring at a whole bunch of padding doesn’t excite me.”

“I’m not wearing it to show you.”

“For that kind of swimsuit,” Sakuta began, originally intending to direct her gaze to a well-endowed mannequin, but some a beautiful blonde woman that would be more persuasive. She was a glamorous foreign woman that would just steal your breath away at a glance.

She had clear blue eyes and plump, erotic lips. You could tell that she was very well endowed even through her clothes, and her waist pulled in tight. She was probably about as tall as Mai, tall for a woman. The woman looked to be in her early to mid-twenties. She was in a corner of the swimsuit area talking to a slender woman with long black hair in fluent Japanese, cheerfully asking for opinions on various swimsuits.

No, looking closer the second person wasn’t a woman, they were a man with delicate features, closer to ‘refined’ than just ‘handsome’. He looked about the same age as the woman.

It wasn’t just Sakuta and Tomoe watching them, the whole store seemed

interested in the international couple.

“What about this?” The woman asked.

“Just pick the one you want,” replied the man, in an apparently bad mood.

“No need to be shy, no one’s watching,” she wheedled.

Actually, I anything, *everyone* was watching. On top of that, he didn’t seem shy, he seemed annoyed. What on Earth was their relationship like?

“They’re all the same.”

“Do you mean they’d all suit me?” The blonde woman laughed teasingly. It was actually rather similar to Mai. She had the confidence of a woman that knew how good she looked. She was joking, but the words themselves were no joke.

“That’s right,” The man immediately admitted. She didn’t seem to expect that and just blinked for a moment. But she soon smiled in real happiness, a brilliant smile that seemed to light up her surroundings.

“It’s rare for you to compliment me.”

“I just said the truth,” he said before moodily leaving the area.

“Ah, wait!” She bounced after him, forcibly linking arms with him as he looked disagreeable.

“You went back to England, why are you back in Japan?”

“I told you that I came for an art exhibition, didn’t I? Ah, my parents came this time as well, so please come to meet them tonight.”

“W-wait a minute, I hadn’t heard anything about them coming.”

“That’s why I just told you.”

Wasn’t this an interesting development? However, the two of them boarded the escalator and vanished downstairs, so there was no way to know how their conversation ended.

“Well, that’s how it is,” said Sakuta, turning back to Tomoe once he regained his concentration, “leave bikinis for when you’ve grown up like that blonde.”

“That’s never gonna happieeeen.”

“Isn’t that better?” Sakuta asked as he picked up a nearby swimsuit.

The top was like a camisole, covering from the chest to the waist. The bottoms were like shorts. Looking closely, you could see that the top and bottom would overlap.

“I’ll think a little more, I’ll buy one this time.”

After staring at it for a moment, Tomoe put the swimsuit back where it came from.

Once they were done shopping, Sakuta and Tomoe took a walk to Yamashita Park. It was a large park that overlooked the sea. Tomoe took pictures on her phone, occasionally taking couple-y ones with Sakuta.

As the sun started to set, Tomoe pointed at the Ferris wheel and suggested they end the day with that.

The city stretched out, lit up beneath them as the gondola slowly rose. The buildings were also illuminated by the evening sun, so she took pictures here too, commemorating the date.

Once it reached its full height, Sakuta brought up something he felt might be a problem.

“Hey, Koga.”

“What?” She asked from where she was pressing her face into the glass, besotted with the sights outside.

“Shouldn’t you think about how we’ll break up?”

“Eh? Ah, yeah, I know.” Tomoe answered as she turned around. Judging by her attitude, she had already noticed as well. Their relationship was well known within the school, and the fact that Sakuta felt so strongly as to fight an older student had also spread throughout the school. Saying that they just drifted apart during the holidays would be a little tough, creating a proper reason to break up would be safer.

“I’ve already thought of how I’ll dump you.” Smiled Tomoe like she was suggesting a new game.

“Wait, *I’m* the one getting dumped?”

“I’m going to go with ‘you couldn’t get over Sakurajima-senpai, and when I realised, I dumped you’.”

“That’s oddly realistic.”

“I’m going to end it with a slap and shouting ‘I don’t need you!’”

“We’re not actually doing that, are we?”

“It’s important to be realistic.”

“So we are...?”

“Make sure you’re free after the closing ceremony. I’m planning the fight for after a date at the beach.”

Tomoe related her plan to slap Sakuta with a smile.

The Ferris wheel was full of couples as it revolved, but there was not a hint of that kind of atmosphere between Sakuta and Tomoe. There weren’t the forced feelings between false lovers either. If they had to put their relationship into words, it would be as friendly schoolmates. They had grown close enough to just naturally play around with each other.

That was why they felt like they would keep the promise they had made earlier in the term.

“Once we’re done with this lie, be my friend.”

The conversation they had been having was just like that of a pair of friends.

“Senpai, what are you grinning at?”

“Nothing.”

“Ehhh, tell meeee.”

To Sakuta, it was a wonderfully comfortable relationship.

4

The exams had finished and the entire school had completely shifted to a holiday mood. Even as they worried and rejoiced over their marks as they were

returned, everyone had the attitude of ‘just one more week.’

The beach was now open, so focusing properly on practice exams in the classroom was ridiculous. Swimming on Shichirigahama beach being forbidden due to the choppy waves was a small help. There probably would have been a minor mutiny if they could see people swimming. That said, Yuigahama beach could be seen from the windows to the left, and Enoshima’s east beach was visible to the right.

The beach huts were distantly visible, and gazing on them every day would make it all in vain even if the students were studying.

The teachers themselves seemed to know this and weren’t particularly passionate either. There was just an aura of pointlessness in the air.

There were already a large number of students already swimming after school. You could tell from seeing their skin which had burnt bright red. This was all part of the summer scene for a seaside school.

Thus, the days passed peacefully.

Sakuta’s false relationship with Tomoe went well too, with no one doubting it. Tomoe was getting on with her friends and she told him during their work shift that she would be going with Rena, Hinako, and Aya to buy a swimsuit.

“Senpai, do you want to see my swimsuit?”

“Nah, not really. More importantly,” he began.

“Don’t say ‘more importantly’ to that!” She interrupted.

“My sister really liked those clothes you chose, thanks.”

“Ah, right, I’m glad.”

“But to think that you’d wear underwear like *that*.”

“Eh!? You looked!?”

“You’re surprisingly daring under your skirt.”

Sakuta spent his days like that, and the last week of term finally came to an end. The last day, the eighteenth of July, a Friday, arrived all too quickly with no fanfare.

Sakuta was woken by Kaede shaking him the same way she did every morning on the day of the closing ceremony.

“Morning, Kaede.” He greeted.

“Good morning.” She replied.

Sakuta left his room and started cooking breakfast, turning the TV on as he waited for the toast to finish. A highlight reel from the Fresh All-Star game that had taken place the night before. The team was made up of nothing but young players and had good prospects in both leagues and had filled Nagasaki Stadium.

Sakuta watched it absently as he ate with Kaede, Nasuno crunching on his own food at their feet.

“The summer holidays start tomorrow,” said Kaede.

“Hmm, what do we need for summer then?”

“A watermelon,” Kaede suggested.

“I’ll go buy one then, I guess.”

“A round one would be good.”

Eating an entire watermelon would be tough. Maybe sharing some with Mai would work, Sakuta thought as he got ready for school and left.

“See you later, Onii-chan,” chimed Kaede as she watched him leave.

He got the train with Yuuma that day, they ended up standing together and holding the hand straps.

“What are you planning over the summer, Sakuta?”

“Work.”

“Well, Koga-san will be there,” Yuuma said teasingly. Sakuta ignored the tone. Yuuma had been quizzical about the relationship at first, but had decided ‘it might work?’ after watching them each day.

“You?”

“Work, club stuff, dates.”

“You youthful prick.”

“You shouldn’t call people that,” Yuuma playfully bumped his shoulder into Sakuta’s as they continued their inconsequential conversation until they got to school.

After their morning homeroom, every student gathered in the gym for the closing ceremony. It was too hot, so the headteacher’s grateful words didn’t enter their minds, there were even students holding fans and waving them at themselves. The teachers were hot too, so they didn’t complain.

Once Sakuta returned to his classroom, he had the final homeroom of the term. The teacher called each of them up by name and handed over their results.

Sakuta, with his surname of ‘Azusagawa’, was called up straight away, without even the time to get nervous and had reality thrust before him in the form of a grading out of ten.

His results were mostly normal, though his physics grade had risen to an ‘8’ thanks to Mai’s Bunny Lessons. Even so, his average remained firmly at ‘6’.

There was a small warning from his teacher about his fight with Maesawa-senpai, but it was written indirectly, and there wasn’t anything else interesting on there.

“Be careful that you don’t get hurt messing around this summer,” said the teacher, ending homeroom. The last words of the term hadn’t changed since Sakuta was in elementary school.

After the student on duty told them ‘rise, bow’, the classroom erupted into cheers. It was over, hurray, it’s finally here, and various other yells mixed together.

Sakuta quickly left the room, hearing those cheers behind him.

The corridors were filled with students that didn’t want to leave each other. They would have lots of free time, so Sakuta thought they should just exchange numbers and go home, but apparently there was some reason they couldn’t do so.

Because there were so many students in the corridors, the path to the station was actually emptier than usual, as was Shichirigahama Station itself, there were only about ten others there when Sakuta arrived.

Sakuta walked to the end of the Fujisawa-bound side and waited for the train. He had about six minutes to wait.

Before it arrived, Tomoe arrived at a jog.

“Ah, you got here first,” she said.

They’d promised to go to the beach together after school today. It would be their last date and they were meeting here.

Tomoe’s clothes didn’t seem to be sitting right on here as she kept fiddling with her waistband.

“I changed into my swimsuit at school,” she answered before he could ask when she noticed where he was looking.

This was a secret technique in schools near the sea. Students that had club activities would come back to school when they were done to use the changing room showers. Yuuma had said he did so last year.

“Senpai, you’ve got a dirty look.”

“I know.”

Flashes of pink from her swimsuit were showing from under her blouse.

“That means stop staring so much,” she said, holding her tote bag in front of her chest.

The train came trundling into the station as they talked.

Sakuta and Tomoe alighted at the Enoshima Enoden Station, and were at the eastern beach within ten minutes. The beach was a wide arc, and always packed at this time of year.

It was still a weekday, so there were only locals around, which made the beach feel rather empty.

They parted for a while in front of the beach huts. Sakuta changed into his trunks, putting on a T-shirt because showing his chest scars would make him

seem like a bad person. He put his things in a locker and went outside, just at the same time as Tomoe who finished quickly because she changed at school.

“Right, let’s swim.”

“Eh? You’re not going to give me your thoughts?”

“I thought you didn’t want me to look too much?”

Sakuta remembered the swimsuit she was wearing, it was the one he had picked up when they were shopping the week before. She hadn’t bought anything then, but she must have found and bought the same one when she went shopping with her friends.

“Well, I think you look cute.”

“D-don’t call me cute.”

“What do you want me to say then?”

“...That I’m cute, I guess?” She answered after a moment’s thought.

“So you’re emotionally unstable again today?”

“That’s what a maiden’s heart is like.”

“Ain’t the foggiest.”

“You seriously irritate me, Senpai.”

“I guess I’ll go get some grilled corn if I’ve annoyed you.”

Sakuta turned on his heel and faced the beach huts.

“I’ll come too.” She called, rushing after him until she reached his side.

Sitting in the summer sun as they eat the corn was superb.

The heavens suddenly opened while they were eating, but they’d get wet in the sea anyway, so that didn’t matter.

At lunchtime, they ate yakisoba at the beach huts and then Sakuta took Tomoe to the water to follow the food with some exercise as they splashed each other with water. Once they were tired they came back to the sand to make castles.

“Let’s see whose castle stands up to the waves better,” Sakuta suggested.

“The loser has to buy shaved ice,” added Tomoe.

“Don’t come crying to me when you lose.”

“The same goes for you.”

Sakuta ended up losing. The deciding factor was a depression in front of the castle. It was where Tomoe had sat while making it and left a mark in the sand with her backside.

“Your backside saved you, Koga.”

“S-shut up. You’ve still got to pay up.”

Tomoe covered her backside with her hands and her face went red.

A loss was a loss, so Sakuta went and bought the shaved ice. Tomoe asked for strawberry syrup with hers, and Sakuta had melon syrup with his.



As the sun began to set, Sakuta and Tomoe sat on the beach and absently watched a five and six-year-old boy and girl playing with a beach ball. The girl's vicious strikes overwhelmed the boy and he caught the ball with his face several times.

"Hey, Senpai."

"Hungry again?"

"Thank you for everything until today."

Sakuta didn't reply.

"Here," said Tomoe, sticking out her hand, "shake hands."

"Why?"

"As a farewell."

Sakuta wiped his hand off on his T-shirt and took Tomoe's small hand in his own.

"Senpai, you ended up still loving Sakurajima-senpai, and I gave up on you and dumped you," said Tomoe as if she was reading a story while she looked out at the waves.

"You don't need to slap me?"

"I'll just say I did. If I hit you now, I'd be being way too ungrateful."

"Well, good work then," said Sakuta, not entirely sure what he should say in this situation.

"Yeah."

"Have a good summer."

"You too, Senpai... I hope you can date Sakurajima-senpai."

"Well, I'll take it slowly."

Tomoe let go of his hand and stood up.

"Let's go home," she said with a smile.

“Yeah, I’m tired from playing in the sea,” Sakuta agreed, hauling himself to his feet.

“You sound like an old man,” Tomoe laughed at him as they collected their things and headed to the beach huts. Once they were done changing, they boarded the Enoden and headed back to Fujisawa.

“Senpai, what are you doing over the summer?”

“Vegging out.”

They rode with that kind of pointless conversation...

Without anything sexual whatsoever...

It was just the end to an enjoyable time. An easy day spent with a friend that they knew well.

Thus, their lie to the entire school ended safely, with no one finding out, and a fun, enjoyable summer arrived.

Everything went well thanks to Senpai.

It’s alright now.

I’m sure it’ll be alright.

But...

I might have made a mistake because Senpai was here.

Chapter 5 — Laplace's Imp

1

Sakuta was woken by a gentle shaking.

“Onii-chan, it’s time to get up.”

Sakuta, the elder brother, slowly rose in response to his sister’s enthusiasm.

“Morning,” he greeted.

“Good morning.”

Sakuta rubbed at his tired eyes.

“You know, Kaede?”

“Yes?”

“There’s such a thing as the summer holidays.”

He could have a lie in today and leave the energetics to the elementary schoolers that did radio callisthenics.

“The holidays start tomorrow though, right?” Asked Kaede, leaning over in curiosity.

What did she just say? He thought to himself.

“Nah, it’s today, yeah?”

“No, it’s tomorrow.”

Sakuta picked up his clock and looked at the familiar LCD display. Written upon the screen was ‘July 18th’, Friday. If Sakuta’s memories were right, that would be yesterday...

The eighteenth was, just as Kaede had said, before the holidays had started, it was the last day of term.

Apparently, that weirdness he had almost completely discounted had happened again, the day had repeated like June the twenty-seventh had.

However, Sakuta was strangely unsurprised. He might have had some inkling

that this might happen, there had been a sense of discomfort remaining from the days that he had spent with Tomoe.

Tomoe had spent the entire day enjoying herself at the beach yesterday, overflowing with smiles as they parted and not showing a hint of worry.

But that itself was what caused the feeling. It had been too empty.

Sakuta wordlessly climbed out of bed and left his room. He put the TV on and it showed the results of last night's game with the Pro-baseball Fresh All-Stars.

It was the same as he had seen yesterday... or rather the first July the eighteenth.

It was a strange sensation, yet still somewhat nostalgic.

"Onii-chan?"

"Kaede, do you want to eat a watermelon?"

"Eh? I do."

"I'll go buy a round one later."

He then ate breakfast with Kaede and prepared for school.

"See you later, Onii-chan," Kaede called as she waved him off with a smile while Sakuta stepped out into his second July the eighteenth.

Sakuta rode the Enoden with Yuuma. He had arrived next to Sakuta and held a hand strap in the same way.

"What are you planning over the summer, Sakuta?"

"Work."

"Well, Koga-san will be there," Yuuma said teasingly, following the familiar conversation.

"You?"

"Work, club stuff, dates."

"You youthful prick."

"You shouldn't call people that," Yuuma playfully bumped his shoulder into Sakuta's the same way he did last time.

Anything and everything Sakuta could remember was the same as the first July the eighteenth he had experienced.

Sakuta left Yuuma in the shoe racks and didn't head for the second-year classroom, but for the first-years', for Tomoe's class.

When he looked in from the door, he could immediately see Tomoe. She was with Rena, Hinako, and Aya around the teacher's desk laughing about something.

Hinako noticed him and nudged Tomoe. Kaede looked surprised for a second, but soon exited into the classroom while paying a little attention to her surroundings.

"Don't just turn up out of nowhere at my classroom," Tomoe said shyly, conscious of the looks from behind her.

"I did feel bad about doing this, but I had to."

The situation being what it was, Sakuta wanted to check things as quickly as possible.

"Did something bad happen?" He asked.

As far as Sakuta was aware, nothing special had happened, everything had gone to plan and proceeded as expected. They had fooled everyone and reached the summer holidays. They had seen the opportunity for Tomoe to be able to explain dumping him and becoming close friends instead. The gossip would have spread throughout the school without them even trying, so everything should have finished.

"Why?" Asked Tomoe with a tilt of her head, looking puzzled.

"What do you mean, 'why'?" Sakuta noticed they were talking at cross-purposes. Tomoe didn't seem to be worried or tense at all, "We're looping again."

"Eh?" Tomoe's mouth dropped open. That reaction settled it, she didn't look like she knew what was happening at all.

"This is the second time today happened, right?"

"...No," Tomoe replied hesitantly, like she was worried about Sakuta.

“Wait, this is your first time!?”

“Yeah,” Tomoe nodded slightly, her gaze fixed on Sakuta.

The chime that signalled the start of homeroom sounded.

“Got it, forget this for now.”

“What about after school?” She asked.

“We’ll carry on like we planned.”

“R-right.”

“Later.”

Tomoe waved somewhat uneasily as Sakuta left those words behind.

Once classes were over and he received the report card that he already knew the contents of, the same grades as last time, the same indirect warning from his teacher about the fight.

“Be careful that you don’t get hurt messing around this summer.”

Once he heard the teacher’s warning, Sakuta left class 2-1’s classroom. The next-door classroom seemed to have finished homeroom before them. There were still several students remaining in the classroom, but Futaba Rio was nowhere to be seen. She was probably in the same place as always.

So thinking, Sakuta headed for the physics lab and, just as he thought, Rio was there, writing some kind of equation on the board.

Sakuta talked from behind her and let her know that the loops were happening again.

“What do you think?” He finished with, asking for Rio’s opinion.

“Azusagawa, are you okay in the head?”

Rio had turned around and had sat across the desk from Sakuta.

“What’s with that question?”

“Don’t answer a question with a question like that.”

“Why exactly do you ask?”

“It’s because you’re asking questions an elementary school student could answer.”

Apparently, elementary school students were rather clever these days, the country’s future was assured, thought Sakuta.

“If, as you think, that first year-” Rio started.

“Koga Tomoe,” Sakuta interjected.

“If she’s Laplace’s Demon, then the answer is simple.”

“Simple?”

“Is there some set difference between the eighteenth and the nineteenth? Like a change in the relationship between you?”

Sakuta remained silent. Rio’s insight was on the money. Sakuta had never said a word to her but she was already suspicious about it.

“I doubt you’d continue that endlessly,” she said, well aware of his personality as well, “you’ve already realised though, haven’t you?”

“Realised what?”

“The reason she’s re-rolling the die again.”

Sakuta looked up at the ceiling as if to avoid her gaze.

It wasn’t as if he didn’t have any idea at all, he would admit that he had some idea.

“But this time, Koga doesn’t know this is the second time.”

That was the only part that didn’t ring true. Sakuta shivered as he remembered her confused reaction from this morning.

“I see... then maybe like I first said, you’re the demon.” Rio didn’t seem interested, to the contrary, she didn’t even seem to believe her own words as she called him a demon. It was like she was just saying it for the sake of it.

“It’s not me.”

“Then there’s only one explanation.”

“Just the one, huh...”

“Yes, that she... is lying.”

Sakuta didn't deny her words.

Sakuta left the physics lab and met up with Tomoe before heading to the beach. Just like last time, they ate grilled corn at the beach huts, made sandcastles, stuffed their faces with shaved ice, and played around in the sea.

Tomoe seemed to enjoy it all.

Before they went home, Tomoe gave her thanks, and then finally shook hands with him just like the first day.

Nothing at all changed. If tomorrow came then there would be no need to say anything.

However, when Sakuta woke the next morning, it was once again the eighteenth of July. This made it the third final day of term, the summer holidays just weren't coming.

On the twenty-seventh of June, the fourth time hadn't come. Based on that experience, Sakuta once again went through the day without changing anything at all, thinking it might be based on the number of repeats.

Tomoe, not knowing of the loops, frolicked in the sea again today.

2

Sakuta's faint hopes were dashed and the fourth July the eighteenth dawned again.

So there wasn't any other way than dealing with Laplace's Demon to get out of this situation.

He got the train at the same time as always and got the same train as Yuuma once more.

“Yo.”

“Hey,” Sakuta answered Yuuma bluntly as the latter smiled brightly.

Yuuma didn't seem to worry about it and grabbed the strap next to Sakuta.

Sakuta opened his mouth and began to speak as they looked out at the tranquil streets.

“Say, Kunimi?”

“Hmm?”

“You’ve got a girlfriend, yeah?”

“Luckily, yes.”

“What would you do if some other girl had feelings for you?”

Yuuma’s expression grew slightly guarded as he paused.

“What would you do if you noticed her feelings?”

“Who are you asking about?” Yuuma asked, trying to ferret out Sakuta’s intention.

“It’s just theoretical.”

“Theoretical, huh?”

Nothing concrete had been said, but from just their conversation so far and Yuuma’s seriousness, Sakuta realised something. Yuuma had noticed Rio’s feelings.

But because of that, he listened to Sakuta’s question without trying to get out of it.

“Doe she... know that I’ve realised?”

“Not yet.”

They both avoided naming names.

“Yet, huh?” Yuuma said with a pained smile, “I’d honestly rather not drag up feelings that she’s hiding.”

Yuuma stayed with not giving any names and looked out at the sea, narrowing his eyes against the radiance.

“It’d also feel like I was being too self-conscious, like who do I think I am?” Yuuma continued, carefully choosing his words. “But I don’t think leaving it like that is a good idea, what’s the right answer there?”

“That’s what I asked.”

They reached Shichirigahama still with no answer.

The entire school gathered in the gym for the closing ceremony, Sakuta's fourth. Of course, because it was the fourth time he was hearing the headteacher's speech so he didn't listen to a word and just thought of other things.

Tomoe to be exact.

He looked at her amongst the first-years in the room. She seemed to notice his gaze and looked back at him. She seemed slightly surprised when their eyes met, but a smile soon made its way onto her face.

Everything all came together for Sakuta when he saw her smile.

"Yes, that she... is lying."

That was exactly what was happening.

After school, they met at Shichirigahama Station and took the Enoden for three stops while they spoke about their results.

They went out onto the brick-paved Subana Street and then crossed route 134 using the subway, and then continued straight on still.

"Senpai? The beach is this way." Said Tomoe, pointing to the left to the beach huts lined up on Higashihama beach. Incidentally, there was Nishihama beach to the right.

"This is my fourth time."

"You're bored of the beach."

"I'm glad you can read the atmosphere well," he said as they crossed the bridge to Enoshima.

"We're going to Enoshima?" She asked as she bounced after him, and Sakuta glanced sidelong at her face.

"Well, we didn't get chance to go on our first date."

"Ah, that's true."

Back then, they had seen one of Tomoe's classmates in trouble when they were crossing the bridge... She, Yoneyama Nana, had actually lost the strap she had bought with her friend.

“The island, the sky, the sea.”

In their path, they could see nothing but Enoshima itself, the blue sky, and the stretching sea.

Tomoe stretched her arms out as if to catch hold of the sky.

Black kites wheeled through the skies, often stealing food from the beachgoers.

Once they crossed over the four-hundred-metre bridge, they were met by souvenir shops for tourists, and shops selling local seafood. The sea was in a good fishing season at the moment.

They passed through a torii and the path changed into a slope that was just on the wrong side of gentle. It narrowed and the nostalgic, traditional atmosphere increased even more. At both sides of the route were shops that sold the area’s famous whitebait and colourful purses and wallets that all drew the eye.

They passed a couple of university students, sharing a huge squid rice cracker.

Sakuta felt a sense of desire from next to him.

“If you buy street food as you walk, you’ll get fat,” said Sakuta, even as he handed the money over to the woman behind the counter.

“I’m dieting from tomorrow.”

“Hmm?”

He held himself back from further comment and took the rice cracker once it had been cooked in front of them.

“It’s huge,” said Tomoe.

It was bigger than Sakuta or Tomoe’s faces.

Splitting it between them, they continued up the path to the nearby shrine as they ate.

A set of stairs came into view with a red torii part-way up. At the top was the Enoshima Shrine, made up of three smaller shrines.

They finished the rice cracker in front of the torii before continuing up one

step at a time.

They climbed in silence and eventually reached the top and the first shrine, Hetsumiya, while completely out of breath.

“My legs are dead,” Tomoe complained.

“You’re supposed to be a first-year.”

“What’s with that logic?”

“You’re young.”

After a while, they caught their breath and visited the shrine properly.

“Koga, they’ve got love ema,” Sakuta pointed out the nearby Musubi-no-ki with many of the votive plaques attached to it, “let’s write one.”

“Eh? We’re lying to the gods?” Tomoe asked.

Ignoring her, Sakuta bought an ema from the shrine-maiden.

“S-Senpai.”

Perhaps thinking that Tomoe’s reaction was out of embarrassment, the woman handed the ema over with a smile.

Sakuta borrowed a pen and used it to write his full name, ‘Azusagawa Sakuta’ in the heart-shaped symbol.

“Here,” he said.

“We’ll get smote,” she answered.

“When you decided to lie to everyone, you had to have had the resolve to fall to hell, right?”

“I don’t mind... but I don’t want to drag you down.”

Tomoe turned the ema over in confusion. It was written what kind of person the ema was for there, and right at the top was ‘someone with an unrequited love’.

A quiet gasp left Tomoe’s mouth.

Tomoe wrote ‘Koga Tomoe’ next to ‘Azusagawa Sakuta’ in curly writing with a worried look on her face. Sakuta then yanked the ema from Tomoe’s hands and

attached it to the tree.

“Senpai! We’ll definitely get a smiting if we put a lie in with all the actual wishes! I’ll just take it home!”

Tomoe reached out her arms and quietly and frantically tried to stop him, trying to make sure the shrine-maiden didn’t hear the word ‘lie’.

“I’m the only one lying, so it’s fine.”

“Eh?”

The strength left Tomoe’s arms and Sakuta used that chance to tightly knot it to the tree, it wouldn’t be easily removed now.”

They once more climbed the stairs in silence like they were going through training, reaching the impressive red pillars of Nakatsumiya. Walking further they arrived at a viewing platform that could be seen from afar. They passed that and aimed for the furthest shrine, Okutsumiya.

The path was narrow with old paving slabs and had a certain mood about it. After a little more walking, there were sets of stairs going up and down, with souvenir shops and cafes, and various food places filling the space.

The scenery was like something that would have been used in old films to show the warmth of people, there was a gentle atmosphere brought into being by people living nearby coming and meeting friends and acquaintances. Sometimes a cat would cross their path, and each time, Tomoe tried to stroke it but it ran away.

“Senpai, about earlier...”

“Hmm?”

“When we were at the tree...”

Sakuta didn’t answer.

“No, it’s nothing.”

He knew what she was trying to ask. In front of the tree, Sakuta had said:

“I’m the only one lying, so it’s fine.”

He could feel Tomoe wanting to know exactly what he meant from his side.

But before she opened her mouth again, they reached Okutsumiya.

They visited the shrine silently. Tomoe's face, as she put her hands together, was awfully serious. What was she wishing for, he wondered.

The path narrowed further as it continued, the narrow steps descending to the western edge of Enoshima... Chigogafuchi.

It was a fifteen-metre wide strip of rock. The water rushing over the surface had removed stone from the surface, smoothing it out. The rock itself had risen in the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 and now looked like this.

It was a pleasant view from the stone, with the weather as it was, Mount Fuji was clearly visible.

The sea breeze wrapped around their bodies. Other couples had stopped on the strange natural protrusion.

"Hinako-chan said that sunsets look gorgeous from here," Tomoe muttered to herself with both hands on the guardrail.

She'd probably realised.

Realised why Sakuta had invited her here...

Realised the meaning behind his words earlier...

She had realised and was pretending that she hadn't.

"Let's go." Suggested Sakuta.

"Yeah."

As they spoke, their sentences became shorter.

They silently trekked back along the path they had taken.

Sakuta and Tomoe barely spoke. They slowly descended the stairs that had been so difficult to climb, passing under the first torii.

Calls of salespeople followed them as they left Enoshima behind.

The beaches stretched out to the left and right from both sides of the Benten Bridge as they crossed it. Going back meant which was on which side had switched. Nishihama was to the left, and Higashihama was to the right. The sun

was climbing across the southern sky, showing the activity on the beaches. There were probably groups that had headed straight to the beach from school. Sakuta and Tomoe had actually intended to at first as well.

“Hey, Senpai, shall we go to the beach now?” Tomoe asked, looking at the beach. “I’m wearing my swimsuit under this after all.”

Her voice was cheerful, she was the same as usual.

Sakuta made his decision at that point, stopping on the bridge. Tomoe took a moment to notice so turned back to look at him in question from about three metres ahead. The two had stopped right in the middle of the bridge, with the sea to either side.

“Senpai?”

“Koga, let’s end this lie.”

“Eh? Ah, right, that was ending today.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“...Senpai? You look kinda scary?” Tomoe looked at him in confusion.

Even so, Sakuta didn’t let his harsh expression slip.

“What? What happened?” She asked.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“Notice *what*?”

“Even if it was a lie, I went out with you for about three weeks.”

Koga fell silent.

“You said before, that I *could* read the atmosphere, I just *didn’t*.”

“Senpai, you’re being strange.”

Tomoe’s face was bewildered, but Sakuta still continued.

“If you won’t say it, I will.”

Koga went silent again.

“Okay?” Tomoe hadn’t looked away from Sakuta for the entire time he had

been speaking, but she did slump slightly as Sakuta carried on, “No matter how many times you re-roll the dice, you won’t change people’s feelings.”

He paused to allow Tomoe to reply, but she didn’t.

“Lies won’t become the truth, and the truth won’t become lies.”

In response to those words, Tomoe gripped tightly to the hem of her uniform, like she was trying to resist something...

“...Even after a hundred times?”

Tomoe’s strangled voice was swept away by the sea breeze as her head remained downcast.

“Yeah.”

“...Even after a thousand?” Her voice shook.

“That’s right.”

“Ten thousand times?”

“It won’t change even after a hundred-million times. I love Mai-san.”

Once more, Tomoe reverted to silence.

“Even if you keep repeating the same things, your feelings won’t change either.”

A heavy silence fell over the pair of them even as large drops of rain began to fall from the sky all of a sudden.

The sky above them was blue, it was a sun shower.

“You’re a liar... Senpai...” Tomoe’s faint voice mixed in with the pouring of the rain, “...Feelings do change.”

The rain was so heavy that it stung as it came down.

“They pile up just from repetition... they *have* piled up...”

Tomoe’s voice grew hoarse as she admitted her lie. Tomoe knew that the day had been repeating, and had pretended that this was the first time on top of that. She played in the sea each time like she didn’t realise it the second or third times, acting.

It was all to hide her feelings.

“I decided I’d forget it... but I couldn’t. I thought I’d manage it this time, but... I couldn’t, even though I decided to say goodbye to these feelings!”

A quavering sensation stabbed through Sakuta’s chest. Tomoe’s crushing feelings finally showed slightly on her face. It was an immensely human reaction, not something a demon would have.

“Today I had a fun last date with you... and had to end our false relationship with a smile. Then when things go well with Sakurajima-senpai next term, I wanted to tease you with ‘good for you’.”

“Koga...”

“And then I’d be your friend, a friend you could talk about anything with. And you’d be my slightly older friend that spoils me a bit. You’d have been happy with it too... and we could have reminisced about how all this was fun, and be good friends forever!” Tomoe raised her face and tried to smile, but failed. “That’s what I was going to do...” Her grief showed in her voice, tightening so much it hurt her chest.

“That’s all I wanted...” she continued, “I didn’t want anything special. I wasn’t going to be selfish. I wasn’t going to cause anyone any trouble, you know? But... but why won’t tomorrow come!?”

Sakuta had no answer for her.

“I decided to leave these feelings, so why are they always stronger every day I wake up!?” That was obvious, even hiding emotions deeply in your chest wouldn’t make them disappear, they never would, those feelings lived on inside. Trying desperately to deny your feelings would just make them grow stronger and stronger... “This is horrible...”

People’s emotions weren’t computer programs, you couldn’t just switch them off. A saved phone number or ID could just be deleted, but emotions couldn’t. People were bound by different things, and these three weeks had bowed Sakuta and Tomoe together.

“I decided not to feel like this anymore... That’s what I decided!”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“I do!” Tomoe would see her way of life through, and that was hurting her, “But you like Sakurajima-senpai. I’m just in the way! Friends don’t feel like this, they don’t need this!”

That was what Sakuta had asked Tomoe for.

“Once we’re done with this lie, be my friend.”

Tomoe had decided to bear her own feelings to grant that request. She had to bear them, so she didn’t burden Sakuta. That’s why she had given up without saying anything, she’d tried to crush her feelings, to act like they didn’t exist from the start and be Sakuta’s friend.

His younger friend that was just a little cheeky.

But dividing her feelings and going through with what she decided was potentially impossible. Her feelings were so strong that she couldn’t control them, feelings she herself didn’t really understand.

This might be the first time Tomoe had faced these feelings.

Their relationship had started with a lie.

And yet, before she knew it, her feelings had become true, the real thing.

Even so, the day of their separation because of the lie arrived... and Tomoe’s now real feelings were the only things left, held strongly within her heart and not solved. The emotions she wanted to express were just held within the dark inside her.

Tomoe’s sense of values would not allow that though. Expressing them would trouble someone, trouble Sakuta. Therefore, she could only keep trying to kill her feelings to be the ‘Koga Tomoe’ that Sakuta wanted, piling up resistance upon resistance.

It was painful, lonely, and gave her nowhere to go, and so once more woke the sleeping demon.

That was the true identity of the demon, the sense of self that Tomoe shut inside her. Her real feelings refused to allow summer to arrive like that. Even if it was a lie, Sakuta had been her boyfriend... so she didn’t want tomorrow to

come.

Even so, Tomoe stayed silent and tried to forget Sakuta, to make it like it never happened, that's why she lied.

"Koga."

Tomoe let out a whimper when he addressed her.

Even if this hurt her, there was something she had to say.

"When did I say you'd be in the way?"

"You're awful, Senpai..."

"You're only noticing now?"

"I don't like you, I hate you! You're awful! You were too kind to me..."

"That's right. So you don't need to try and spare my feelings."

"I don't like me either, I hate me... this isn't me!"

"Nope, that's you, it's you as well."

"No! This isn't me! I want the summer holidays to come! I want to be friends and have fun with you already! That's all I want!"

Even now, Tomoe didn't shed a single tear, she seemed to know that if she started then that would be the end of everything as she looked at Sakuta with teary eyes.

"Stop lying to yourself now."

Tomoe gave no answer.

"You're a high-schooler of justice, right?"

"That's not fair... you can't say it like that..."

"There's nothing you can't do."

"That's not fair, it's not, Senpai..."

"You don't need to bear it anymore."

"You idiot, Senpai! You idiot! I hate you, I hate you! But..." Tomoe's voice was tinged by tears, "but... I like you..." Tears welled further in her eyes.

“I like you, Senpai...” She took a deep breath in through her nose, sniffing, “I love youuuuuu!”

The feelings Tomoe had held within herself for so long came bursting forth, beating right in to Sakuta, pure and unfettered.

“Koga,” he spoke quietly, doing all he could to be gentle... She held up against her tears for a moment, but Sakuta’s words wouldn’t let her continue to. “Well done.”

Tomoe’s face was dishevelled as she let out the start of a cry, her tears shining on her cheeks.

“You fought really hard.”

“Uuu...Uwaaaahhhhh...”

She sobbed loudly, unable to speak, crying as her tears fell with the rain to her feet, *drip drip, drip drip...*

The blue sky looked down on them, tall, distant, and clear as far as the eye could see. The rains had stopped.

This World You Chose

Light shone from beyond Sakuta's eyelids and when Sakuta noticed that, he realised he had woken up. The morning sun cast cloud-like shadows across his familiar ceiling from the crack in the curtains. The sensation of his bed on his back let him know that this was his own room.

He reached his hand out for his digital alarm clock as usual. If the day hadn't repeated this should be the nineteenth of July, the first day of the summer holidays. As he went through this mentally, he brought the clock into his site.

A moment passed with him staring uncomprehendingly at the display. He had thought that it would be the nineteenth of July shown on the screen, or if not it would be the eighteenth once again. However, the clock was showing Sakuta a completely different date.

"Huh?"

Sakuta rose and went to the living room, turning the TV on just as the morning news started.

"Well done, team Japan!"

It was a familiar, almost nostalgic phrase. The newscaster's excitement and happiness were clear.

"Good morning, today is Friday, June the twenty-seventh. I think we'll start the day on football!"

The next thing shown on the TV was from the world cup going on on the other side of the world, highlights from the second group league match.

It was just before halftime, and the Japanese team were a single point behind. Number 10 had dribbled the ball all the way up the pitch but was taken down by an overzealous defence from the opponents. The whistle pierced the stadium and they were given a free kick from just behind the penalty area.

Taking the kick was player number four. His shot came after a short run-up and passed the keeper, stabbing home into the net. Number four let out a roar

of triumph and the rest of the eleven players gathered around him, shouting in joy.

The team took heart in that point and in the next half gained another, winning the match 2-1.

Even as he watched the news program, Sakuta was thinking of a certain person. Koga Tomoe.

She was his junior in the year below, and Laplace's Demon.

"Man, she's amazing..." he said unconsciously, "was it all a simulation of the future from the start?"

It was exactly as Rio had suggested that day. The repetition of the day wasn't travelling through time, it was calculating the future from a certain point.

And the point in question was, namely, June the twenty-seventh.

Sakuta could do nothing but laugh at this ridiculous situation.

After he finished his breakfast, Sakuta got dressed as usual and left for school.

It was June, so the rainy season was not yet over. The amount of sunlight bearing down on him was better than the July he had experienced until yesterday, but the humidity was correspondingly higher so the weather was rather muggy.

He arrived at school without incident and Yuuma called out to him from the shoe lockers.

"Sup, Sakuta. You've got bed-head again."

"It's a hairstyle."

"A fresh trend, huh?" Yuuma returned with a smile. It was a conversation he remembered, from the 'June the twenty-sevenths' he had experienced before.

"What's up, Sakuta?" Kunimi asked, noticing his silence.

"...Nothing."

"Seriously, what?"

"Your handsomeness is just pissing me off."

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ahhh, it really is.”

The four classes he had that morning were maths, physics, English, and Japanese. In maths, the teacher said “This’ll be on your exam”, the physics teacher’s lame jokes were going strong. In his third period of English he was given the slight warning of “Listen to me, Mister Azusagawa” and told to read from the textbook, and of course, the Japanese teacher’s collar had lipstick on.

It all came together for Sakuta, reinforcing the feeling that he really had experienced the future.

And then, lunch arrived.

Sakuta and Mai were alone in a classroom on the third floor. A damp sea-breeze blew in from the slightly open window, making the curtain flutter, it all coming together to create a peaceful mood.

Atop the desk between them was the lunch that Mai had made for Sakuta. Seasoned and fried chicken, fried eggs, potato salad garnished with cherry tomatoes, and seaweed and simmered beans made up the meal. Sakuta kept praising the taste as he sampled each thing.

Mai, who had boasted of her cooking skill, looked satisfied with how it went.

“Mai-san,” Sakuta addressed her once he had finished eating.

“Hm?” She noised, with the tip of her chopsticks still in her mouth as she ate.

“I love you, please go out with me.”

“ ... ”

Mai looked away and put her own fried egg in her mouth with her chopsticks.

“ ... ”

She chewed it.

“ ... ”

Even when he waited for her to swallow, she gave no reply.

“It’s kind of uninspiring.” Mai let out a bored-sounding sigh. “Having the same

thing said for a whole month makes it lose its impact.”

“I see... it’s a failed love then. I guess I’ll have to look for someone else then.”

“Hey, wa-”

“Thank you for everything until now,” he interrupted her with a polite bow and a deep, disappointed sigh of unrequited love.

“I-I didn’t say no... What, are you giving up!?” Mai glared at him with a pout.

“You will then?”

“Ugh... you’re so cheeky even though you’re just you.”

“You will?” He asked again, not giving up.

“...Yeah,” she answered in a barely audible voice with a small nod, “I will.”

Then, as if to hide her embarrassment, Mai wordlessly stuffed a fried egg in her mouth. Now he just needed to make sure of one thing.

“Say.”

“What?”

“How do you think of me?”

“‘How’, it’s...” as she spoke, Mai dropped her gaze to the cherry tomato in her chopsticks.

“It’s...”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m asking because it does,” Sakuta insisted.

“You’re too stubborn.”

“Well yeah, because this is important.”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I want to hear it from your lips.”

Those lips took in the cherry tomato, whereupon she chewed it thoroughly before swallowing.

“I’ll only say this once.”

“Okay.”

Silence fell for a moment, and he could hear Mai taking a quiet breath in. Immediately afterwards, she looked out of the window and gave a cry of surprise.

“Hmm?” Sakuta followed her gaze and could see the sky and sea of Shichirigahama. There wasn’t anything particularly interesting there, just the stream of large summer clouds.

A soft scent assaulted him, and his vision went dark. When he noticed that, there was a gentle warmth touching his cheek.

He turned back to face Mai with surprise.

“You should get it now, right?”



Mai smiled playfully, with a blush on her face.

Unthinking, Sakuta raised his hand to his cheek. That sensation had been, without a doubt, Mai's lips.

"Mouth-to-mouth would have been good."

"Don't get carried away," Mai warned, stepping on his foot under the desk, but it didn't hurt at all. "Stop your smirking too."

"You're the one that made me smirk though."

Sakuta savoured the enjoyable time with Mai.

The warning bell for the end of lunch sounded, unfortunately ending their lunch date as well. Sakuta stepped out into the corridor to go back to his classroom.

On his way, he saw a familiar person on the stairs he was going to use, Koga Tomoe.

The third year, Maesawa-senpai was with her. There was an unusual atmosphere about the two of them, so Sakuta stood against the wall of the corridor out of sight.

"I'm sorry, I can't go out with you, Maesawa-senpai."

Sakuta took a glance at what was happening and saw her giving a polite bow of her head.

"You don't have a boyfriend at the moment, right?"

"I don't."

"Do you have someone you like?"

"I do," nodded Tomoe without hesitation.

"Someone in the basketball club?"

"No."

"Then-"

“He’s a primitive that doesn’t have a smartphone in this day and age,” said Tomoe, a smile blooming on her face like a flower as she spoke.

“Huh?” Maesawa-senpai didn’t seem to understand what she meant, but still climbed off up the stairs with a “Well, see you then.”

Sakuta passed him with a nonchalant look on his face, going down the stairs, immediately meeting Tomoe’s eyes as she noticed him.

“Peeping is a crime,” she complained.

That phrase on its own let Sakuta know that she remembered everything.

“I just happened to be passing by.”

“Hmmm.”

“Anyway, who are you calling a primitive?”

“I didn’t say anything about you,” she said with a pout, “being too self-conscious isn’t cool.”

From a mental standpoint, Sakuta had rejected Tomoe only yesterday, being able to stand in front of him like this was a testament to her strength, so he’d forgive her.

“You’ll take responsibility for this, right, Senpai?” She asked.

“Hmm?”

“This will make Rena-chan hate me and make it so I don’t have anywhere to go in my class.”

“And why so I have to take responsibility for that?”

“Because it’s your fault.”

“And how is that?”

“Because you made me an adult.”

“That sounds kinda erotic.”

“You always say things like that, even when you get what I mean, are you shy?”

She smiled as if she was seeing through his trick. Her cheeky attitude made

him a little irritated, but reacting would be like he was admitting she was right, so he got back on topic.

“Well, whatever else happens, you’ll always have me as a friend,” he said, patting her on the shoulder, “so you won’t be alone.”

“Well, *I’m* the one that’s going to be *your* best friend.”

Tomoe had continued to be cheeky, so Sakuta took a hand to that hairstyle, that she woke up at six in the morning to do, and messed it up.

“Ahh, stop it!”

He didn’t, not until the bell signalling the end of lunch rang.

From then, the time until the summer holidays began went in a surprising direction. The days that Sakuta and Tomoe had experienced happened just as they did before.

The Japanese football team broke through from the group league and steadily advanced to the best eight. They were regrettably defeated afterwards, but they could use it to tell the world that their hopes of victory weren’t just a dream.

The last few weeks at school and the contents of the exam were exactly the same, all questions he had taken before and checked his answers on, so Sakuta got good marks. It felt a little like cheating, but when he thought of the hardships of being caught up in an instance of Adolescence Syndrome, he thought he’d be allowed this much.

Tomoe started working at the same restaurant as him, and Kamisato Saki had called him up to the roof on a certain Saturday.

Things with Mai went the same too, she brought the clothes for Kaede, went to Kagoshima for a week to film, phoned him from there, made him study suddenly and even wore the bunny girl suit for him.

There was the subtle difference of not having the ‘false lovers’ relationship with Tomoe, but without exception, everything happened very similarly.

It was more than enough for Sakuta to not think of the days from June the twenty-seventh to July the eighteenth as a simple dream, but rather as an

actual prediction of the future.

One day after school, he had talked to Rio about it all.

“If that’s true, then that’s a surprising situation.” She said in answer.

“You think I’m lying?”

“If you were false lovers with that first-year during the prediction, then that’s telling a lie, right?” She said, carefully not saying she believed anything more.

“But, well... a girl that frantically read the atmosphere to fit in ended up able to read the future as well before she realised.” Rio continued to herself, as if agreeing with the statement.

The one remaining question is why was Sakuta the only one brought into Tomoe’s Adolescence Syndrome? The other seven billion people in the world had not realised the situation, and had not noticed the repeating days.

When Sakuta asked Rio, she said,

“Maybe it was quantum entanglement?”

She had said it in an expectant tone, like he should already know it.

“So it was quantum entanglement.”

“Yes, you know of it?”

“Ain’t the foggiest.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Something like ‘I don’t know about it at all’.”

“Hmm.”

Seeming somewhat interested, Rio wrote ‘foggiest’ on the board.

“Anyway, what’s quantum entanglement?” Sakuta asked.

“A strange phenomenon where a particle instantaneously shares information with another far from it with no intermediary.”

“So particles use phones too?”

“I *did* say with no intermediary.”

“Then particles have telepathy?”

“Well, that works as a model.”

“Eh, seriously?”

He’d meant it as a joke...

“There’s actually world-class universities studying whether telepathy is possible using quantum entanglement.”

“Again, *seriously?*”

“Quantum entanglement itself is a well-documented phenomenon.”

“So you’re saying that Koga and I were entangled?”

Rio slowly nodded in response to his question.

“What entangled us then?” He continued.

“Entanglement happens when particles collide. Have you clashed with that first-year.”

He had a single idea.

“We kicked each other’s backsides.”

Rio had no answer to that for several moments.

“Azusagawa.”

“What?”

“I want to confirm reproducibility, bend over.”

“I refuse.”

“Bend over already, you low-life.”

“Is that how you ask someone for something!?”

Rio’s expression then fell into a slight disappointment, apparently, she had actually been serious.

After rejecting Maesawa, Tomoe... just as she had said, was pushed out of Rena’s group. On Wednesday the next week, Sakuta found her slumped on the roof eating her lunch alone. He moved next to her and sat with her, eating his

own lunch.

“I’ll go to the toilet with you if you like?” He offered.

“That’d be embarrassing.”

“Don’t hold back.”

“That’s seriously creepy, I’ll report you.”

The same thing happened on Thursday and Friday, but on the first day of exams... he saw Tomoe talking with some classmates on the train. It wasn’t Rena, nor was it Hinako or Aya. Even so, he knew that she was a first-year in Tomoe’s class because he had met her in the future simulation.

She was the girl who had dropped her strap during his and Tomoe’s first date, he was sure her name was Yoneyama Nana. The strap that Tomoe had gotten soaked to save back then was hanging from her phone.

Sakuta thought that Tomoe had probably searched with her for it and as proof, Tomoe had caught a cold at the same time again.

“I made a friend,” Tomoe told him at work around the time their exams ended.

“The strap girl?”

“Yeah, Rena-chan let her into the group as well.”

“Good for you.”

“Right,” she said, somewhat shyly, but clearly also happily, “it’s thanks to you, Senpai.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

The only thing Sakuta had done was to help her out of her habitual behaviour. It was because of her personality that he was able to make up with Rena and the others, that was what Sakuta thought.

“I was able to do it this time without lying because of you, Senpai... Thank you.”

In one sense was the literal meaning of what she had said, she finished this without lying to the people around her, but he thought that she was also

speaking in the sense of lying to herself.

Their worries had vanished and the days passed peacefully. The end of term was soon upon them.

The headteacher gave his usual closing remarks and Sakuta had his report card off his own teacher.

The final homeroom ended and he met with Mai in front of the shoe lockers before leaving school with her. Mai had often not been at school over the past few weeks because of work, so it had actually been a whole fortnight since they had been able to go home like this.

“Right,” said Mai after they boarded the train at Shichirigahama Station, holding her hand out for something. He went to try and give her his own hand, but she moved it swiftly out of the way. “I’m saying to give me your report card.”

“You didn’t say that though?”

“Just give it.”

“I normally wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Why do you want to see?”

“You’re going to the same university as me, right?”

“That’s what I wrote on the survey...”

“Just give it,” she insisted, not seeming to have any intention to let the matter go, so Sakuta decided to present it.

“If I did better than you expected, will you give me a reward?”

“If your average is higher than seven, I’ll grant a request for you.”

Minegahara worked on a ten point scale, an average above seven was a fairly good mark.

“That’s a tall order,” he said, reluctantly handing it over.

The moment she opened it, Mai’s expression changed to one of surprise.

“Eh, what?”

Sakuta hadn't calculated it, but he should have a higher average than seven, which was in itself thanks to Laplace's Demon. Sakuta got the feeling he should treat Tomoe to lunch now. After all, now Mai would grant him a request.

“Nooooow then, what shall I have you do?”

“If you suggest something strange, we're breaking up,” Mai warned him as she handed the card back to him.

“Then come to mine and cook dinner tonight?”

“Is that all?”

Your girlfriend coming over to your house and cooking for you was a pretty high-level event as far as Sakuta was concerned, and that was if she wasn't Sakurajima Mai, *that* just made it all the better, but she didn't seem to realise that.

“I'm looking forward to seeing you in an apron,” he added.

“I don't wear an apron when I cook though.”

“Ehhh.”

“Fine, fine, I'll wear one.”

“If you feel like it, you could wear nothing *else*?”

“Maybe I should add laxative as well.”

“It was a joke.”

“You were deadly serious,” she said.

He turned aside her knowing look with a smile.

“I'll stop at the shop on the way once we get off the train, okay?” He asked.

“I'll come with you,” she answered.

What could he say, a shopping date would be perfect.

When Sakuta and Mai stepped outside after finishing their shopping, it was to rain pouring from the skies. The rain was fairly heavy considering how clear the skies were, a perfect sun shower.

“Sakuta, do you have an umbrella?”

“I do,” he said, quickly taking it from his back and unfolding it. Mai just stepped in next to him.

“Give me one of them,” Mai said.

Sakuta’s right hand was taken up by the umbrella, his left shoulder had his bag on it, and the hand of that arm was filled by the plastic bag from the shop, with a spring onion sticking out from the top.

“I’m okay.”

“Are you?”

He tilted the umbrella so that Mai wouldn’t be rained on as they walked off.

“Mai-san, what are you going to make?”

“It’s a secret, if I told you now it’d be no fun.”

“Well, guess so.”

They continued walking as their conversation continued, then they arrived at a park that was two or three minutes from Sakuta’s house.

As they went to walk past the entrance, Mai suddenly stopped.

“I wonder... what’s wrong with her?”

Sakuta followed her gaze to see a girl standing by herself in front of some bushes just inside the entrance, under a red umbrella. She was wearing a nearby middle school’s uniform. It seemed new still, so she was probably a first-year.

He wondered how long she had been there, her shoulders and feet were fairly soaked. When he looked closer, there was a cardboard box hidden in the bush.

Together with Mai, who had taken the first step, Sakuta walked over to the girl.

“What’s wrong?” Sakuta asked quietly.

The face hidden under the umbrella turned in their direction.

The moment he saw the girl’s ephemeral expression, Sakuta felt a sense of

foreboding. No, it wasn't exactly foreboding, it was somewhat like he had met her before, like she looked similar to some acquaintance he had.

"Ah, this little one..." answered the girl faintly, looking back at the box. Inside, a kitten had curled up, shivering perhaps from the cold of the rain. She was worried about the cat, but seemed to be stuck there, lost as to what to do.

"Mai-san, hold the umbrella?"

"Right," she answered, immediately taking the umbrella.

Sakuta crouched and picked the kitten up in one hand.

"I'll take him to mine, for now, if he gets better then that's fine, if not we'll take him to the vet's."

"Okay, ah, but."

"Hm?"

"I wanted to adopt him."

"Ah, then..." Sakuta started, before giving his home phone number to the girl. As he did, the girl took her phone out and recorded the number.

"Is this right?" She asked, showing him the screen.

"That's fine, my name is Azusagawa Sakuta, from the Azusagawa in the 'Azusagawa Service Area', and the Sakuta from 'Blooming Flower Tarou'."

She typed in the name just as he said it. When she was done, she raised her gaze from her phone and looked Sakuta steadily in the eye.

"My name is Makinohara Shouko," she told him.

Sakuta's heart pounded painfully when he heard her name, but he didn't immediately understand what she had said.

He blinked several times, the foreboding he had felt solidified. It was a name he had heard, she had a face that he thought he had seen before, and in response to that odd feeling of rightness, Sakuta's mind was filled with even bigger questions.

"What was that?"

“I’m Makinohara Shouko,” the middle school girl in front of him repeated, saying the same name as the high school girl Sakuta first fell in love with.